45. U.S. Security Strategy

Congress should

- act as a much-needed check on the executive branch's reflexive tendency to expand the global political and military role of the United States under the guise of U.S. ''global leadership'';
- initiate a comprehensive review of existing U.S. security commitments and jettison those that are not clearly linked to vital national security interests;
- review the defense budget and make the necessary reductions to bring it in line with a security strategy that is based on the defense of vital national security interests; and
- refuse to provide funding for military interventions except in the unlikely event that such an intervention is a necessary response to a national security threat.

The 10th anniversary of the end of the Cold War will be celebrated in 1999. Unfortunately, the United States has yet to formulate a viable national security posture to address the greatly changed strategic environment.

If anything, U.S. strategy over the past decade has gone from bad to worse. In the last days of the Cold War, there may have been confusion in Washington about how to deal with the challenges of the post–Cold War world, but there was also near-consensus that the end of the Cold War presented opportunities that outweighed the new hazards. Equally important, policymakers of all ideological stripes viewed the end of the Cold War as a respite for the United States. After four decades as the leader of the free world, America would be able to relinquish some of the burdens of that guardianship.

Instead of devoting tremendous national resources—blood and treasure—to defending the world against the communist threat, the United States would behave as a normal great power. Like any great power, the

United States would vigorously protect its vital national security interests using many means, including force. Absent the Soviet threat, however, the United States would be able to rise above most day-to-day turmoil around the globe.

In the decade since the Berlin Wall fell, Washington has increasingly fallen back into Cold War habits—at great cost to Americans and considerable risk to U.S. vital interests. Instead of curtailing Cold War era overseas security commitments, the United States has assumed significant new ones under the mantle of U.S. ''global leadership.'' Much of the Persian Gulf region has become a de facto U.S. military protectorate, and a soon-to-be-enlarged NATO will obligate the United States to defend 19 countries (up from 16) as if they were U.S. territory. The United States is also increasingly immersed in parochial regional conflicts, most notably in the Balkans—where much of official Washington's preoccupation with events in Kosovo adds to the burden undertaken in Bosnia with the ill-conceived Dayton Accords.

U.S. ''Global Leadership'' and Strategic Overextension

The United States cannot solve all the world's problems. It cannot act as the world's social worker—taking responsibility for rehabilitating the rest of the world by redressing human rights violations, humanitarian disasters, and the absence of democracy wherever such blight offends American sensibilities.

Nor can the United States be the global cop. Washington is not the arbiter of law and order throughout the world, even when it comes to such matters as weapons proliferation or the activities of ''rogue states'' such as North Korea or Iraq.

Policymakers and politicians often call upon the United States to play each of those roles or, more ominously, both. Republicans and Democrats alike call upon the United States to show ''global leadership''—suggesting that the United States is responsible to some degree for everyone, everywhere. Even the most ardent internationalists may not necessarily believe that. But basing U.S. national security strategy on a mission to lead the world clearly results in the dilemma of deciding which situations demand Washington's attention and which can be left to run their course. It is a prescription for strategic overextension, inconsistency, and hypocrisy.

Making Promises Washington Cannot Keep

Put simply, the United States is incapable of keeping many of the commitments it has made. Moreover, there was no credible strategic

rationale for assuming most of those obligations in the first place. That recklessness has already come at considerable cost, and those costs are sure to rise unless major adjustments are made.

The potential military implications of making empty promises (or threats) are obvious. When the United States intervened in Somalia, pledging to create stability amidst cruel urban warfare, it quickly became apparent that U.S. troops had undertaken a mission without adequate resources. American soldiers lacked both physical equipment suitable for such warfare and, perhaps even more serious, Washington's political backing to succeed in their mission. One of the more gruesome results was the ambush that killed 18 U.S. Army Rangers in the streets of Mogadishu. Pressure immediately built to withdraw U.S. forces. When the high costs—both financial and human—of such commitments become apparent, the American public is unwilling to support interventions that do not involve U.S. vital interests.

Many U.S. commitments are never tested in battle, of course, but still take a devastating toll on the United States if they are shown to be empty. In August 1998, for example, there were numerous reports that Washington had pressured UN weapons inspectors to call off challenge inspections of suspicious sites in Iraq earlier in the year. Yet at the same time the alleged incidents occurred, Washington was the world's most vocal proponent of such inspections. The United States argued that the international community must show zero tolerance for any resistance on the part of Iraq to full and unconditional compliance with UN inspections.

After nearly a decade of heated rhetoric condemning Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, it became clear that Washington could not fulfill its stated policy of ''keeping Saddam in the box'' at a cost acceptable to policymakers. So the Clinton administration quietly abandoned that policy, but it failed to recalibrate its rhetoric. Exposure of such a discrepancy does tremendous harm to U.S. credibility. The weaker U.S. credibility becomes, the more likely that Saddam and other adversaries will test U.S. credibility in the future—perhaps by military means.

Pursuing a policy of intervention anywhere and everywhere has concrete costs that the United States can ill afford. The budget for national defense—approximately $275 billion in fiscal year 2000—is one of the most obvious financial costs. In real terms, today's budget is about the same as it was in the late 1970s during the Cold War and costs, on average, about $1,000 for every American man, woman, and child. Much of that sum can be attributed to Washington's overambitious national security posture.

The human costs must also be considered. Impressive military spending is not always enough to maintain a stance of global military leadership—sometimes U.S. troops will have to be put at risk to prove U.S. prowess. Americans will die for purposes far less important than U.S. security.

Alleged Benefits of U.S. Political and Military Leadership

Proponents of the U.S. crusade to lead the world point to several purported benefits of that policy. One of the most persistent myths is that—by assuming responsibility for leading the world—the United States is able to persuade other countries to share the costs of initiatives that it would otherwise have to bear alone. The Gulf War is the preeminent example of such alleged burden sharing. Yet the United States offered concrete economic or political rewards to many key countries to encourage their participation in the coalition against Iraq. Moreover, Washington today continues to pay about $80 billion per year to defend Saudi Arabia and the other wealthy southern Persian Gulf states. The Europeans buy far more oil from this region than does the United States but do little to help defend it. The price tag for defending the region clearly eclipses any temporary burden sharing that occurred back in 1991. Washington's willingness to assume responsibility for security in many parts of the world—not only in the Persian Gulf region but in East Asia and Europe as well—encourages free riders, not burden sharing.

It is also questionable whether the United States needs to defend Persian Gulf oil at all. The oil market has changed dramatically since the 1970s. (Even then, oil shortages reduced the nation's gross domestic product by less than half of 1 percent.) New technology has allowed new sources of oil to be tapped and efficiencies in usage, resulting in the lowest oil prices since the late 1960s. As a result, the Persian Gulf supplies less of the world's oil than it did during the 1970s. Even at the time of the Gulf War, prominent economists from across the political spectrum cautioned that defending oil was not a justification for war. That argument is even stronger today.

Another rationale for attempting to manage global security is that a world without U.S. hegemony would soon degenerate into a tangle of chaos and instability, in which weapons proliferation, genocide, terrorism, and other offensive activities would be rampant. Prophets of such a development hint that if the United States fails to exercise robust political and military leadership today, the world is condemned to repeat the biggest mistakes of the 20th century—or perhaps do something even worse.

Such thinking is seriously flawed. First, instability in the international system is nothing new, and most episodes do not affect U.S. vital interests. Furthermore, to assert that U.S. global leadership can stave off otherwise inevitable global chaos vastly overstates the power of any single country to influence world events. Indeed, many of the problems that plague the world today, such as civil wars and ethnic strife, are largely impervious to external solutions. There is little to back up an assertion that only Washington's management of international security can save the world from political, economic, or military conflagration.

A World without U.S. Intervention

If Washington renounces world political and military leadership, is the United States condemned to stand idly by while villains and irredentists around the world terrorize helpless populations? It is unfortunate but true that brutal civil or subregional conflicts are likely to mar the future—as they do the present and have the past. Furthermore, there are many parochial wars that simply cannot be settled by outside powers at an acceptable cost to those powers, whether or not the United States claims the mantle of global leadership.

A more critical issue is the evolution of the international system after the United States adopts a policy of strategic independence. Washington can exert considerable, though not complete, influence over how that system develops. A number of different systems may be acceptable to the United States, but two conditions are essential. First, power must be diffuse—that is, not concentrated in the hands of a single state or multinational organization. Second, the system must have a means of checking aspiring hegemons.

Such a system could take several forms. One possibility is to strengthen regional security organizations—both to keep order among member states and to take care of contingencies in their immediate areas. The European Union, with a robust military capability, would likely be an appropriate organization for promoting security in Europe.

Spheres of influence would also be a possibility. Although that idea sometimes has a sinister connotation, there is nothing inherently wrong with the concept that major powers take an interest and play a major role in affairs in their regions. As long as dominant powers restrict their activities to normal great power behavior—which would generally mean shoring up prestige and security but not expanding their domains—spheres

of influence are potentially a valuable means of keeping order in certain regions.

Yet another alternative is the establishment of regional balance-of-power arrangements. This approach would be appropriate in areas where there is no dominant power around which a sphere of influence is likely to develop—such as in the Middle East, where the locus of power tends to shift among the larger states and little enthusiasm exists for a regional security organization.

The United States as Balancer of Last Resort

As long as any international system possesses the two key features mentioned above—diffuse power and a means of checking would-be hegemons—the United States could tolerate a variety of regional arrangements. As long as no single power or group of powers emerges with the capability and intent of challenging American vital interests, the United States should be reasonably secure. In particular, as long as a hostile hegemon does not have the potential to overrun regions of high economic output—that is, Europe or East Asia—or does not try to interrupt U.S. trade, American vital interests will not be threatened.

To further enhance its security, the United States should always maintain sufficient military strength so that it could reestablish the balance of power if a serious imbalance were to develop. It should, however, act only as a balancer of last resort. The United States should allow smaller scale shifts and civil strife to be addressed at the regional level. The risks and costs of serving as balancer of last resort are much more manageable than is a quixotic crusade to lead the world.

Suggested Readings

Carpenter, Ted Galen. ''Toward Strategic Independence: Protecting Vital American Interests.'' *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1995).

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