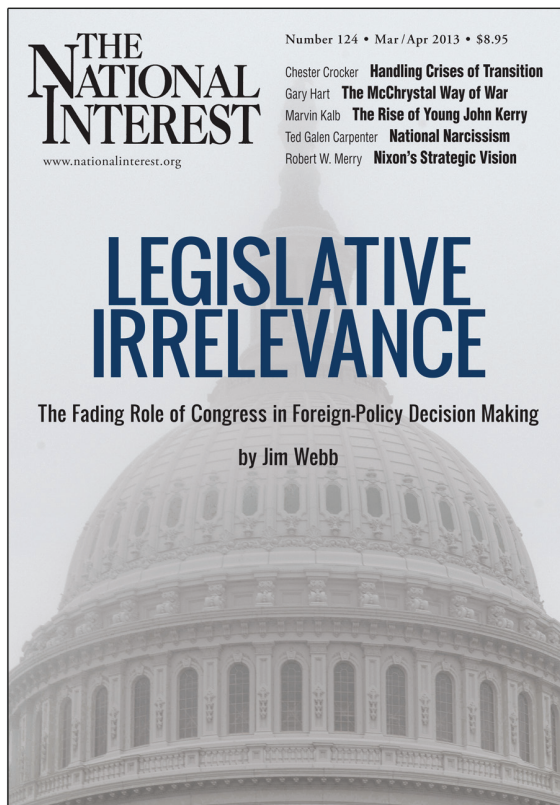


# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Number 124 • Mar / Apr 2013



EDITOR *Robert W. Merry*

The National Interest • 1025 Connecticut Avenue, N.W. • Suite 1200 • Washington, D.C. 20036  
Phone (202) 467-4884 • Fax (202) 467-0006 • [editor@nationalinterest.org](mailto:editor@nationalinterest.org)

The contents of *The National Interest* are copyrighted. ©2013 The National Interest, Inc.

All rights reserved. Reproduction and distribution of this material is permitted only with the express written consent of *The National Interest*.

# Delusions of Indispensability

By Ted Galen Carpenter

One striking feature of foreign-policy discussions in the United States is the widespread assumption that this country is the “indispensable nation” in the international system. Historian James Chace and Clinton presidential aide Sidney Blumenthal apparently coined the term in 1996 to capture the essence of Bill Clinton’s liberal-internationalist vision of the post–Cold War world, but it is a term that conservatives and moderates as well as liberals have used frequently since then. In his 2012 State of the Union address, Barack Obama asserted that “America remains the one indispensable nation in world affairs—and as long as I’m President, I intend to keep it that way.”

Only a handful of iconoclasts in the foreign-policy community—and even fewer mavericks in the political arena—dare to challenge the conventional wisdom. That is unfortunate, because the notion of the United States as the indispensable nation is not only dubious, but it also entrenches a counterproductive security strategy. It is a blueprint for strategic overextension and, ultimately, a failed paradigm.

The term “leadership” itself is often a euphemism for those who see the United

States as the indispensable nation. They usually mean America as the de facto global hegemon, and some are occasionally candid enough to use that word. Mitt Romney succinctly expressed the concept when he asserted that “America is not destined to be one of several equally balanced global powers.” Discussing the U.S. role in East Asia, American Enterprise Institute scholar Daniel Blumenthal warned of dire consequences if the United States no longer played “the role of benign hegemon in Asia.”

Although some pundits and policy experts suggest that U.S. leaders should encourage other “cooperative” countries to have a greater voice and play a larger role in collaborative enterprises, even such proponents of multilateralism tend to become anxious if the United States is not clearly in charge on important matters. The neoconservative faction in the U.S. policy community does not even pretend to favor genuine multilateralism. Their preferred strategy is one in which the United States either acts unilaterally—often with a tinge of contempt for the views of other countries—or acts as the undisputed leader of a coalition, as during the Iraq War.

Proponents of the indispensable-nation thesis all agree that it would be calamitous for Washington to step back from its current global role. Such a move, in their view, would damage crucial U.S. interests, as well as the overall peace and prosperity of the world. They differ among

---

**Ted Galen Carpenter**, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a contributing editor to *The National Interest*, is the author of nine books on international affairs, including *Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America* (Cato Institute, 2008).

themselves, though, on just what form that calamity would take.

For most, the primary danger they foresee is that chaos would ensue if the United States did not exercise robust global leadership. Writing in 2000, William Kristol, founder and editor of the *Weekly Standard*, and Robert Kagan, at the time a scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, warned that the greatest danger in the twenty-first century was that the United States, “the world’s dominant power on whom the maintenance of international peace and the support of liberal democratic principles depends,” would “shrink its responsibilities and—in a fit of absentmindedness, or parsimony, or indifference—allow the international order that it created and sustains to collapse.” Blumenthal agrees that such a terrible fate would certainly befall Asia, insisting that without U.S. hegemony, “chaos would ensue. No one would lead efforts to further build upon an economically vital region, stem proliferation, or keep great power peace.”

Stuart Gottlieb, a former foreign-policy adviser to two senior Democratic senators, insists that history confirms that point on a global basis. He argues:

Over the past century, each of America’s attempts to reduce its role in the world was met by rising global threats, eventually requiring a major U.S. re-engagement. . . . In each case, hopes were soon dashed by global challengers who took advantage of America’s effort to draw back from the world stage—Germany and Japan in the 1930s, the Soviet Union in the immediate post-World War II period and the Soviet Union again after Vietnam. In each case, the United States was forced back into a paramount global leadership role.

Although most proponents of continued U.S. dominance argue that global chaos

would be the inescapable consequence, there is another concern, especially among hawkish conservatives. While they do fret about the possibility of planetary anarchy, their primary worry is somewhat different. Orthodox believers in America’s indispensability assume that no other nation or combination of nations could fill the void Washington’s retrenchment would create. But some advocates of U.S. preeminence disagree, believing that other major nations would move to fill such a leadership vacuum. And they fear that the most likely replacements are nations whose values and policies are hostile to America’s interests.

When not writing pieces with the apocalyptic Kristol, Kagan hedges his bets between the two unsavory aftermaths of U.S. withdrawal:

The present world order—characterized by an unprecedented number of democratic nations; a greater global prosperity, even with the current crisis, than the world has ever known; and a long peace among great powers—reflects American principles and preferences, and was built and preserved by American power in all its political, economic, and military dimensions. If American power declines, this world order will decline with it. It will be replaced by some other kind of order, reflecting the desires and the qualities of other world powers. Or perhaps it will simply collapse, as the European world order collapsed in the first half of the twentieth century.

Kagan’s one certainty is that a world without U.S. dominance would be an unpleasant place. As he writes, “The belief, held by many, that even with diminished American power ‘the underlying foundations of the liberal international order will survive and thrive,’ as the political scientist G. John Ikenberry has argued, is a pleasant illusion.”

Not surprisingly, most of the suspicion about potential new hegemony is directed at two major powers that are not liberal democracies: Russia and China. The jaundiced American view of Moscow has diminished, given the demise of the Soviet Union and the decline of Russian political and military clout since the end of the Cold War. But that change is more modest than one might expect. Russophobes may not hate and fear Vladimir Putin as much as they did the likes of Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev, but an undercurrent of hostility remains. The shrill reactions of Bush and Obama administration officials (and many pundits) to Russia's reluctance to endorse harsher sanctions against Iran—and more recently, against Syria—is one manifestation. Staunch proponents of NATO suggest privately, and sometimes even publicly, that Moscow might again seek to dominate Eastern and Central Europe in the absence of a robust, U.S.-led NATO.

The principal suspicions, though, are directed against a rising China. Princeton University's Aaron Friedberg, one of the more sensible and moderate neoconservatives, argues that China is already determined to displace the United States as East Asia's hegemon. His latest book, *A Contest for Supremacy*, presents that thesis emphatically. Cambridge University's Stefan Halper, a former official in both the Nixon and Reagan administrations, believes that trend is not confined to Asia. In his recent book *The Beijing Consensus*, Halper contends that China is presenting itself as a rival global model (one of authoritarian capitalism) to the democratic-capitalist model (the "Washington Consensus")

that the United States guards and sustains. He argues further that Beijing has made considerable inroads in recent years.

It would be a mistake, though, to assume that devotees of the indispensable-nation thesis only fear that hostile, undemocratic nations would move to fill a regional or global leadership vacuum. U.S. policy makers in both the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations were also noticeably unenthusiastic about even another democratic nation—or a combination of democratic nations—supplanting Washington's leadership role. During the 1990s, two editions of the Pentagon's policy-planning guidance document for East Asia made veiled warnings that another nation might step forward—and not in a way consistent with American interests. Given China's modest economic capabilities and military weakness at the time, the Pentagon's concerns did not seem directed primarily at that country. Both the language in those documents and the strategic context suggested that the principal worry of the Department of Defense planners was



*A prominent feature of the indispensable-nation thesis is that its adherents adopt the “light-switch model” of U.S. engagement. In that version, there are only two positions: on and off.*

---

that Japan might remilitarize and eventually eclipse U.S. power and influence in the region.

The U.S. attitude toward a greater—and especially a more independent—security role for the European Union and its leading members has not been much friendlier. Time and again, the Clinton and Bush administrations discouraged their European allies from being more assertive and proactive about the Continent’s security needs. Members of the U.S. policy community viewed with uneasiness and suspicion any move that threatened the preeminence of NATO as Europe’s primary security institution. This was not surprising. Washington not only has a chair at NATO’s table, it occupies the chair at the head of the table. Conversely, there is no U.S. seat when the EU makes decisions. For Americans who relish Washington’s dominance in transatlantic affairs, that absence of an official U.S. role is troubling enough on important economic issues. They deem such a development on security issues even more worrisome.

**A**nother prominent feature of the indispensable-nation thesis is that its adherents adopt the “light-switch model” of U.S. engagement. In that version, there are only two positions: on and off. Many, seemingly most, proponents of U.S. preeminence do not recognize the existence of options between the current policy of promiscuous global interventionism and “isolationism.” Following President Obama’s second inaugural address, *Wall Street Journal* columnist Bret Stephens was most unhappy with the

sections on foreign policy. The title of his column, “Obama’s You’re-On-Your-Own World,” conveyed his thesis in a stark manner. Obama’s worldview, Stephens asserted, constituted a species of isolationism. Such an indictment of Barack Obama—the leader who escalated the war in Afghanistan, involved the United States in the Libyan civil war, led the charge for harsher sanctions against Iran, Syria and North Korea, and is pursuing a strategic pivot toward East Asia in large part to contain China’s power—would seem to strain credulity. But for the more zealous proponents of U.S. dominance such as Stephens, even rhetorical hints of modest retrenchment in portions of the world are reasons for alarm.

Adherence to the light-switch model reflects either intellectual rigidity or an effort to stifle discussion about a range of alternatives to the status quo. Even in the security realm there are numerous options between the United States as the global policeman—or what it has become over the past two decades, the global armed social worker—and refusing to take any action unless U.S. territory is under direct military assault. It is extraordinarily simplistic to imply that if Washington does not involve itself in civil wars in the Balkans, Central Asia or North Africa, that it would therefore automatically be unwilling or unable to respond to aggressive actions in arenas that are more important strategically and economically to genuine American interests. Indifference about what faction becomes dominant in Bosnia or Mali does not automatically signify indifference if China attempted to coerce Japan.

Selectivity is not merely an option when it comes to embarking on military interventions. It is imperative for a major power that wishes to preserve its strategic solvency. Otherwise, overextension and national exhaustion become increasing dangers. Over the past two decades, the United States has not suffered from a tendency to intervene in too few cases. Quite the contrary, it has shown a tendency to intervene in far too many conflicts. But many of the opinion leaders who stress the need for constant U.S. global leadership advocate even more frequent and far-ranging U.S. actions. *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen takes President Obama to task for not being more proactive against the Syrian government. Cohen argues further that a “furious sense of moral indignation” must return to U.S. foreign policy. Indeed, it should be “the centerpiece” of that policy.

His comments illustrate a worrisome absence of selectivity regarding military interventions among members of the indispensable-nation faction. There is always an abundance of brutal crackdowns, bloody insurrections and nasty civil wars around the world. If a sense of moral indignation, instead of a calculating assessment of the national interest, governs U.S. foreign policy, the United States will become involved in even more murky conflicts in which few if any tangible American interests are at stake. That is a blueprint for endless entanglements, a needless expenditure of national blood and treasure, and bitter, debilitating divisions among the American people. A country that has already sacrificed roughly 6,500 American lives and nearly \$1.5 trillion in just the past decade pursuing nation-building chimeras in Iraq and Afghanistan should not be looking to launch similar crusades elsewhere.

Not only do disciples of the indispensable-nation doctrine seem to

regard engagement as a binary light switch, they fail to distinguish between its various manifestations. The thesis that engagement can take different forms (diplomatic, military, economic and cultural) and that U.S. involvement in each form does not have to be at the same level of intensity is apparently a revolutionary notion bordering on apostasy. To those disciples, the security aspect dominates everything else. Mitt Romney warned that America must lead the world or the world will become a more dangerous place, “and liberty and prosperity would surely be among the first casualties.” Among the dangers Kagan projects is “an unraveling of the international economic order,” because, among other reasons, “trade routes and waterways ceased to be as secure, because the U.S. Navy was no longer able to defend them.”

Proponents of an expansive U.S. posture repeatedly assert that a peaceful international system, which is the also the foundation of global prosperity, requires a hegemon. They most frequently cite Britain in the nineteenth century and the United States from the end of World War II to the present, although some even point to the Roman Empire as evidence for their thesis. In his book *The Case for Goliath*, Johns Hopkins University’s Michael Mandelbaum even asserts that the United States performs many of the benevolent stabilizing functions that a world government would perform. That, in his view, has been enormously beneficial both for the United States and for the world.

Leaving aside the ultimate fate of the Roman Empire, or even the milder but still painful decline of Britain—which were in part consequences of the economic and security burdens those powers bore—the hegemonic model is hardly the only possible framework for a relatively stable and peaceful international system.



There are constructive alternatives to the stifling orthodoxy of the United States as the indispensable nation. That is especially true in the twenty-first century. Not only are there multiple major powers, but a majority of those powers share the democratic-capitalist values of the United States and are capable of defending and promoting those values. Moreover, even those great powers that represent a more authoritarian capitalist model, such as Russia and China, benefit heavily from the current system characterized by open trade and an absence of armed conflict among major powers. They are not likely to become aggressively revisionist states seeking to overturn the international order, nor are they likely to stand by idly while lesser powers in their respective regions create dangerous disruptions.

**T**he most practical and appealing model is a consortium of powerful regional actors, with the United States serv-

ing as a first among equals. The opportunity for Washington to off-load some of its security responsibilities is most evident in Europe. Making the change to a more detached security strategy there would offer important benefits to the United States at a low level of risk. It made a reasonable amount of sense for Washington to assume primary responsibility for the security of democratic Europe in the aftermath of World War II. Western Europe was the most important strategic and economic prize of that era, and a powerful, expansionist Soviet Union eyed that prize. The Western European powers, traumatized and exhausted by World War II, were not in a good position to resist Moscow's power and blandishments. U.S. leadership was nearly inescapable, and it was warranted to protect and promote important American interests.

But even during the final decades of the Cold War, the U.S. security blanket unfortunately caused an excessive and unhealthy dependence on the part of democratic Europe. And with the demise of the Soviet Union, a policy based on U.S. dominance now reeks of obsolescence. Despite its recent financial struggles, the European Union collectively has both a population and an economy larger than those of the United States. And Russia, if it poses a threat at all, is a far less serious menace than was the Soviet Union. Yet U.S. leaders act as though the EU nations are inherently incapable of managing Europe's security affairs. And for their part, the European allies are content to continue free riding on Washington's exertions, keeping their defense budgets at minimal levels and letting the United States take primary responsibility for security issues that affect Europe far more than America.

Even a modest increase in defense spending by the principal European powers would enable the EU to handle any

*If moral indignation, instead of a calculating assessment of the national interest, governs U.S. foreign policy, Washington will become involved in murky conflicts in which few if any tangible interests are at stake.*

---

security problems that are likely to arise in the region. In that sense, Washington's dominant role in dealing with the Balkan conflicts in the 1990s was not evidence of the continuing need for U.S. leadership, but rather underscored the negative consequences of having encouraged Europe's security dependence on the United States for so many decades. The reality is that the threat environment in Europe is quite benign. There are few plausible security threats, and the ones that might arise are on the scale of the Balkan spats—problems that the European powers should be able to handle without undue exertion. Washington can safely off-load responsibility for European security and stability to the countries directly involved. The United States is most certainly not indispensable to the Continent's security any longer.

Prospects in other regions are less definite, but there are still opportunities for Washington to reduce its military exposure and risks. The most important region to the United States, East Asia, presents a less encouraging picture than does Europe for off-loading security obligations, since there is no cohesive, multilateral organization comparable to the EU to undertake those responsibilities. Yet even in East Asia there are alternatives to U.S. hegemony, which has been in place since 1945.

Washington's dominance was born in an era in which there were no credible challengers. Although the USSR had some ambitions in the western Pacific, its primary goals were elsewhere, largely in Eastern Europe and the emerging states of the Third

World. China after the Chinese Revolution in 1949 was belligerent, but also weak and poor. Japan, utterly defeated in World War II and worried about Soviet and Chinese intentions, was content to maintain a pacifist image and rely heavily on the United States for defense. The rest of the region consisted of new, weak states arising out of rapidly decaying European colonial empires.

As in Europe, the situation today is totally different. Japan has the world's third-largest economy, China is an emerging great power, and East Asia has an assortment of other significant economic and political players. It will be increasingly difficult for the United States, a nation thousands of miles away, to dominate a region with an ever-expanding roster of major powers.

Instead of frantically trying to prop up a slipping hegemony, U.S. policy makers must focus on helping to shape a new security environment. Among other steps, Washington should wean its principal allies in the region—especially Japan, South Korea and Australia—from their overreliance on U.S. defense guarantees. Not only should U.S. leaders make it clear that the United States intends to reduce its military presence, but they should emphasize that those allies now must take far greater responsibility for their own defense and the overall stability of the region.

The most likely outcome of such a policy shift would be the emergence of an approximate balance of power in East Asia. China would be the single strongest country, but if Japan, South Korea, and



other actors such as Vietnam and Indonesia take the actions necessary to protect their own interests, Beijing will fall far short of having enough power to become the new hegemon. A balance-of-power system would be somewhat less stable than the current arrangement, but it would likely be sufficient to protect crucial American interests. And it may be Washington's only realistic option over the medium and long term. Clinging to an increasingly unsustainable hegemony is not a realistic strategy.

Off-loading security responsibilities in other regions needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. In most instances, adverse developments in those regions affect other major powers more than they do the United States. It is a bit bizarre, for example, that Washington should take more responsibility for developments in the Middle East than do such NATO allies as Germany, France, Italy and Turkey. Or that Washington is more concerned about troubles in South and Southeast Asia than are major powers such as India and Indonesia. But other relevant actors have not had to step forward to deal with unpleasant developments that might undermine regional stability, because the self-proclaimed indispensable nation has usually taken on the responsibility. That is not sustainable.

In the all-too-rare instances in which the United States did not seek to take care of problems that mattered more to other powers, those countries did not inevitably sit back and watch the situation deteriorate. One example occurred when conflict broke out between rival factions in Albania in the late 1990s and Washington declined to lead yet another intervention in the Balkans. Faced with the U.S. refusal, Italy and Greece organized and led an ad hoc European military coalition that restored order before the turmoil could intensify and spread beyond Albania's borders.

Various foreign-policy experts have

presented detailed cases for options that would reduce the extent—and hence the costs and risks—of America's security role. Boston University's Andrew Bacevich, Texas A & M's Christopher Layne and the Cato Institute's Christopher Preble are just some of the more prominent analysts who chart a course between the extremes of the current policy and Fortress America. All of them, to one extent or another, make the case for off-loading at least some of Washington's security commitments onto other capable powers and adopting a new, more restrained posture of "offshore balancing."

The notion that the United States is the indispensable nation is a conceit bordering on narcissism. It had some validity during an era of stark bipolarity when a weak, demoralized democratic West had to depend on American power to protect the liberty and prosperity of the non-Communist world from Soviet coercion. But the world has been multipolar economically for decades, and it has become increasingly multipolar diplomatically and politically in recent years. Yet so much of the American political and foreign-policy communities embrace a security role—and an overall leadership role—for the United States that was born in the era of bipolarity and perpetuated during what Charles Krauthammer described as the "unipolar moment" following the collapse of the Soviet empire.

That moment is gone, and that is not the world we live in today. The United States needs a security strategy appropriate for a world of ever-increasing multipolarity. Very few critics of U.S. hegemony advocate an abandonment of all of America's security commitments. But an aggressive pruning of those commitments is overdue. It is well past time for the EU to assume primary responsibility for Europe's security and

for Japan to emerge as a normal great power with appropriate ambitions and responsibilities in East Asia. It is also past time for smaller U.S. allies, such as South Korea and Australia, to increase their defense spending and take more responsibility for their own defense. While the off-loading of Washington's obligations needs to be a gradual process, it also needs to begin immediately and to proceed at a brisk pace. And Washington ought to make it clear to all parties concerned that it is entirely out of the business of nation building.

Those who desperately try to preserve a status quo with America as the indispensable nation risk an unpleasant outcome. A country with America's financial woes will find it increasingly onerous to carry out its vast global-security commitments. That raises the prospect of a sudden, wrenching adjustment at some point when the United States simply cannot bear those burdens any longer. That is what happened to Britain after World



War II, when London had no choice but to abandon most of its obligations in Africa, Asia and the Mediterranean. The speed and extent of the British move created or exacerbated numerous power vacuums. It is far better for the United States to preside over an orderly transition to an international system in which Washington plays the role of first among equals, rather than clinging to a slipping hegemony until it is forced to give way. □