Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing No. 16: The Case for U.S. Strategic Independence

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Executive Summary

The goal of global stability, which is the guiding principle of President Bush's "new world order" will mean preserving a host of Cold War era security burdens while creating several new ones for the United States. An emphasis on stability has been the underlying theme in the administration's response to numerous situations, including the "tilt" toward the central government in Belgrade during the initial stages of the Yugoslavian crisis and the lack of enthusiasm for secessionist movements in the Soviet Union before the failed August 1991 coup. The same attitude was evident in President Bush's comments after the November 1991 NATO summit in Rome: "The enemy is unpredictability. The friend is stability."[1]

Although global stability might be appealing in the abstract, the costs and risks entailed in achieving that goal are excessive. One of the worst effects is the perpetuation of such obsolete Cold War era military alliances as NATO and the bilateral defense treaties with Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK). Those commitments are enormously expensive. The NATO commitment alone cost American taxpayers more than $120 billion a year during the latter stages of the Cold War. Even with the scaled-down U.S. troop presence in Europe that the Bush administration projects, the annual price tag will still be approximately $92 billion. Washington's obligation to defend Japan, South Korea, and other East Asian allies costs another $40 billion.[2]

The financial consequences of maintaining such alliances can be measured in another way. The United States currently spends nearly seven times as much on the military as does any other member of the Group of 7 (G-7) industrial powers. Indeed, it spends some 60 percent more than all of the other G-7 countries combined.[3] A nation that faces daunting domestic problems, including a ballooning federal budget deficit, an overtaxed citizenry, and a sluggish economy, can ill-afford that kind of disparity. We must ask whether in a post-Cold War world the United States really has seven times the security interests of Germany--or France, or Britain, or Japan--to defend.

Washington's Cold War era alliances also have the potential to entangle the United States in a host of obscure conflicts that have little relevance to America's legitimate security concerns. The ongoing transformation of NATO from an alliance to deter Soviet aggression against Western Europe into a regional crisis management organization is a case in point. That new mission blurs the boundaries of NATO's traditional theater of operations and threatens to involve the United States in volatile and intractable ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe and the decaying Soviet empire. The commitment to defend South Korea puts American forces on the front lines of one of the most dangerous areas of the planet--even though the Cold War rationale for assuming such a grave risk has vanished.

It is time to recognize that with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the mission of America's Cold War alliances has been accomplished. U.S. policymakers must now move to create a new defense strategy that is appropriate for a post-Cold War setting and that does not waste American resources or needlessly risk American lives. We cannot afford to maintain alliances for the sake of having alliances. We now have both the opportunity and the need to adopt a new

policy of strategic independence.

The Unattainable Objective of Global Stability

Making global stability the guiding star of U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War era is dangerously short-sighted. The immediate future is likely to be extremely turbulent, regardless of what the United States does. Many regions are still dealing with the legacy of the imperial age. Throughout the Balkans, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia, the European imperial powers carved out colonies or established client states without reference to the wishes of the indigenous inhabitants or long-standing linguistic, cultural, and economic patterns. In some cases, ancient enemies were grouped together in a single jurisdic tion; in other instances, ancient cultures were arbitrarily divided.

It is hardly surprising that those imposed artificial political settlements are now being challenged. Iraq's attempted annexation of Kuwait, the turmoil in Yugoslavia, and the disintegration of the last multinational empire--the Soviet Union--are all omens of the post-Cold War era. An attempt by Washington to maintain global stability in the face of such deeply rooted trends is doomed to failure.[4]

Advocates of a global stability mission also mistakenly assume that other major international actors will be cooperative junior partners in U.S.-led security efforts. But the belief that Japan and the Western European powers will continue to follow Washington's leadership as they did throughout the Cold War is erroneous. International relations theory (as well as international relations history) would predict the gradual dissolution of Cold War era solidarity now that there is no longer a credible common threat to promote cohesion among allies. U.S. leaders cannot assume that the diplomatic, economic, and military agendas of the other G-7 powers will always coincide with our own-- much less that those nations will routinely defer to Washington's policy preferences.

America's Cold War era allies have already begun to pursue increasingly independent political and military policies. The members of the European Community (especially Germany) have rather unceremoniously edged Washington to the diplomatic sidelines in efforts to deal with the Yugoslavian crisis. France and Germany have proposed an expansion of their joint military brigade to approximately 50,000 troops--an action that is clearly the first step toward the creation of an all-European force. Japan--long diffident about playing a leadership role in security matters--surprised most observers by suggesting a security dialogue with the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Instead of welcoming such signs of growing self-reliance on the part of other major democratic capitalist powers--or at least adjusting gracefully to the changing reali- ties--U.S. officials have often reacted petulantly. National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft chastised the members of the European Community for adopting "independent" positions on security issues and then presenting those positions to the United States.[5] Similarly, Secretary of State James A. Baker III criticized the notion of Japanese-ASEAN security cooperation.[6] The Bush administration expended considerable diplomatic capital to thwart French efforts to create a rapid reaction force under the auspices of the European Community rather than NATO and viewed with suspicion the expansion of the Franco-German military brigade.

Such responses are most revealing in light of Washington's long-standing habit of prodding U.S. allies to share security burdens. Apparently, the U.S. concept of burden sharing means only that other great powers should pay for a larger percentage of the costs of policies adopted by Washington, not that they should take greater responsibility for defending their own security interests, much less adopt independent strategies for doing so.

Washington's Obsolete Alliances

Instead of seeking to preserve an expensive system of U.S.-dominated alliances, the United States should view the eclipse of Soviet power as an opportunity to adopt a less pretentious and more cost-effective policy. For the first time in 50 years, there is no powerful challenger, such as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, that could pose a grave threat to America's security, nor is there a potential new threat visible on the horizon. That is a watershed development that should fundamentally alter U.S. defense policy.

The post-Cold War world is likely to be a disorderly place, but without a powerful rival to exploit the turmoil, most of

the conflicts and quarrels will be largely irrelevant to America's own security interests. The United States can, therefore, afford to view them with detachment, intervening only as a balancer of last resort if a conflict cannot be contained by powers in the affected region and is expanding to the point where America's security is threatened.

The vastly changed international system means that Washington's network of Cold War era alliances is an expensive anachronism. It makes little sense to maintain more than 150,000 U.S. troops in Europe to defend Western Europe from a Warsaw Pact that no longer exists. When NATO was established in 1949, the European democracies, still devastated and demoralized by World War II, faced an aggressively expansionist Soviet Union. Today, Western Europe is economically powerful and politically vibrant while the Soviet Union is extinct. Given their economic and military resources, the members of the European Community should certainly be able to defend themselves against any present or future secondary threats.

A similar transformation has occurred in East Asia. When the United States first undertook to defend the security of South Korea in the 1950s, that country was an impoverished, war-torn hulk confronted by a communist North Korean adversary backed by the Soviet Union and China. Today, South Korea is an economic dynamo with twice the population and more than 10 times the gross national product of North Korea. Moreover, North Korea is becoming increasingly isolated as both Beijing and Moscow seek to forge closer political and economic ties with the South. Given such conditions, it is absurd to contend that South Korea cannot build whatever military forces are needed for its security and must, therefore, forever remain a U.S. protectorate.[7]

It is even more difficult to justify keeping Japan a protectorate. Japan has the world's second largest economy as well as one of the most dynamic and technologically sophisticated. Yet Tokyo spends an anemic 1 percent of its GNP on the military while the United States spends more than 5 percent. Given the increasingly fierce competition between American and Japanese firms in a host of international markets, we can ill-afford to burden our economy with excessive military expenditures that enable Japan to save vast sums that it might otherwise have to use to protect its own security.

Other U.S. alliances in East Asia, most notably ANZUS and the bilateral security treaty with the Philippines, are equally obsolete. Even if it once made sense to protect those countries from the Soviet Union or other communist expansionist powers (in the unlikely event that such a threat materialized), that rationale has disappeared. Yet Washington insists on preserving its obligations throughout East Asia.

Instead of viewing the changes in the international system as an opportunity for the United States to shed security burdens and downsize a bloated military budget, U.S. officials search for new missions to justify the perpetuation of old alliances. For example, they insist that NATO and the U.S. troop presence in Europe are needed to prevent instability in Eastern Europe--essentially a scarecrow function. Aside from the question of whether such a mission is worth $92 billion a year, the onset of civil war in Yugoslavia demonstrates that a U.S. military presence has little ability to deter the kind of ethnic conflicts that are likely to plague Eastern Europe in the post-Cold War era.

It would not be in our interest to become involved in such conflicts. Most Americans accepted the costs and risks associated with the NATO commitment during the Cold War. But the rationale for that commitment was the need to prevent an expansionist Soviet Union from gaining control of the population and technological assets of Western Europe and then using that additional strength to pose an increased threat to America's own security. Accepting the risks and costs of a vague mission to preserve an elusive stability in Eastern Europe is another matter entirely. The division of power between Croats and Serbs, the unity or breakup of Czecho-Slovakia, and the treatment of the Hungarian minority in the Transylvanian region of Romania may all be extremely important issues to the parties involved. But such disputes would rarely affect even the European, much less the global, geopolitical balance and are therefore hardly essential to America's security. Taking the risk of becoming entangled in the ancient and intractable ethnic conflicts of Eastern Europe is not merely unnecessary; it would be foreign policy masochism.

The same is true of the U.S. treaty obligation to defend South Korea. In a Cold War context, it was possible to argue that a North Korean attack on the South would pose a threat to America's security because such an attack would in reality be an expansionist probe by a Soviet or Chinese surrogate. That is no longer a plausible scenario. Pyongyang may still harbor aggressive ambitions, but even if it were to launch an attack on the ROK, the resulting conflict would

now be a parochial one between the two rival Korean states. It need not and should not have cosmic geostrategic ramifications. In a post-Cold War setting, South Korea is, at most, a peripheral U.S. interest whose defense does not warrant the expenditure of billions of dollars or the risk of thousands of American lives.[8]

There has been considerable discussion recently about the threat posed by North Korea's apparent effort to acquire nuclear weapons. The emergence of North Korea as a nuclear power would be an unsettling development for the entire East Asian region, and Washington should diligently pursue diplomatic initiatives (including enlisting the aid of Beijing and Moscow) to pressure Pyongyang to honor the agreement reached with the ROK to make the Korean peninsula a nuclear-free zone.[9] Nevertheless, even a nuclearized North Korea must not become a justification for indefinitely preserving the U.S. security commitment to South Korea. Indeed, it should be an additional reason for severing that commitment. The only thing worse than becoming involved in a conflict between states armed with conventional weapons when vital U.S. interests are not at stake is becoming involved in a conflict in which one or more of the combatants have nuclear weapons. It is true that without the U.S. nuclear shield, Seoul might decide to acquire an independent deterrent if the agreement with North Korea eventually unravels. Although such a proliferation of nuclear weapons is not an appealing prospect, it is better than putting the United States at risk in an effort to deter one of the most unpredictable and irrational regimes on the planet.

An Alternative: U.S. Strategic Independence

A new U.S. policy of strategic independence is needed. Strategic independence would have three guiding principles. The first would be a definition of "vital" security interests that is narrower than the vague and casual one used during the Cold War. A vital interest ought to have a direct, immediate, and substantial connection to America's physical survival, political independence, and domestic liberty. The second principle would be an emphasis on U.S. decisionmaking autonomy and flexibility. Washington should avoid alliances, especially those with vague, long-term obligations, since they both limit America's options and can entangle the United States in conflicts that are of little relevance to its own security. They also lock the United States into commitments that may make sense under one set of global conditions but are unnecessary or undesirable when those conditions change. The final principle would be to resist pursuing ambitious international "milieu" goals-- especially "stability," which lies at the heart of President Bush's new world order. America would undoubtedly be happier in a world composed entirely of peaceful democratic states, but such a goal is unattainable--or at least it is not attainable at an acceptable level of cost and risk to the United States. Moreover, while such a transformation of the international system might be desirable, it is not essential to America's security.[10]

Strategic independence is not merely another sterile exercise in burden sharing. Washington has tried to get its European and East Asian allies to pay more of the expense of collective defense efforts for the past four decades--without a great deal of success. (The Bush administration's ability to cajole the allies into paying for much of the Persian Gulf operation is an impressive, but probably unique, exception. Even those contributions were obtained only after unprecedented diplomatic browbeating.) If meaningful burden sharing was difficult to attain during the Cold War, when the U.S. defensive shield was of considerable value to allies facing a looming Soviet threat, it is likely to prove even more difficult to attain in a post-Cold War world. The value of Washington's military protection to the allies has depreciated markedly in the past two years, and their willingness to pay more for that protection can be expected to decline as well. For the same reason, the notion that maintaining an extensive U.S. troop presence in Europe and East Asia will give Washington "leverage" on trade and other economic issues is an illusion.[11] The U.S. presence is no longer valuable enough to induce the Europeans or the Japanese to make more than cosmetic concessions.

Instead of embarking on another futile round of burden-sharing campaigns, Washington should adopt a policy of burden shedding. A burden-shedding policy would entail the gradual but complete devolution of responsibility to America's allies for the defense of their respective regions. The process can be completed in an orderly fashion over a five-year period in both Europe and East Asia. Although the exact pace and timing of security devolution should be determined in consultation with the allies, the ultimate result should not be subject to negotiation--much less an allied veto.

Just as strategic independence is not burden sharing, it is also not isolationism. The United States can and should maintain extensive diplomatic, cultural, and economic ties with the rest of the world.[12] Washington must also

maintain sizable and capable military forces and be prepared to take decisive action if a serious threat to America's security does emerge. A judicious, albeit aggressive, pruning of security commitments is needed, not the creation of a hermit republic.

The most difficult adjustment for U.S. officials will be to accept other powers' assuming larger roles in regions where America abandons its strategic hegemony. It is predictable that major European powers, acting either collectively through the European Community or individually, will adopt more assertive positions. Similarly, Japan is likely to eventually play a political and military role in East Asia commensurate with its status as a economic great power.

Such changes may be unsettling not only for the United States but for smaller powers in the affected regions. But attempting to preserve U.S. dominance would involve even greater risks. For example, perpetuating a large-scale U.S. military presence in the western Pacific could ultimately create serious frictions in U.S.-Japanese relations. A majority of Japanese favored the American security shield throughout the Cold War because it offered reliable protection from a menacing Soviet Union and spared Japan from spending scarce resources on the military. But with the dissipation of the Soviet threat, it will not be long before many Japanese begin to wonder why such large numbers of American forces remain. Eventually, the suspicion (not entirely unfounded, if one can judge from the comments of some outspoken U.S. military leaders) will grow that they are there to "contain" Japan.[13] That suspicion could poison the entire range of U.S.-Japanese relations. Many Germans are likely to harbor a similar suspicion and feel alienated from the United States once the last Soviet forces leave German territory, if Washington still insists on maintaining a sizable military presence.

A policy of strategic independence is based on a more modest and sustainable security role for the United States and on a realistic assessment of the post-Cold War international system. It takes into account the fundamental changes that have occurred in the world in recent years and seeks to position the United States to benefit from the emerging multipolar political, economic, and military environment.

The new strategy would make it possible to defend America's security interests with a military force of approximately 900,000 active duty personnel--compared with the current force of some 2 million and the force of 1.6 million contemplated by the Pentagon for the mid-1990s. A policy of strategic independence would enable the United States to reduce its military budget from the current $291 billion a year to approximately $125 billion a year (measured in 1991 dollars) over a five-year period. The beneficial economic impact of a "peace dividend" of that magnitude, if returned to the American people in the form of tax reductions, would be enormous.[14]

After those reductions, the United States would still be spending three times as much on the military as any other G-7 member. The reductions seem radical only in the context of the bloated Cold War era military budgets that have come to be considered "normal." But the Cold War is over, and with its passing we must change our ideas of what constitutes normal defense spending. Instead of accepting marginal changes in military budgets that are still largely based on obsolete Cold War assumptions, the American people should insist on the defense policy equivalent of zero-based budgeting. That approach would require the adoption of a coherent defense strategy based on the realities of the post-Cold War international system and a careful assessment of what is actually needed to protect the nation's security. America cannot afford to pursue the mirage of a new world order, nor can it tolerate the continuing hemorrhage of its wealth to subsidize the defense of prosperous allies who are now capable of defending themselves.

Notes [1] White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Press Con ference by the President, November 8, 1991, transcript, p. 4.

[2] For discussions of how costs are allocated to theaters of operations, see Earl C. Ravenal, Designing Defense for a New World Order: The Military Budget in 1992 and Beyond (Washington: Cato Institute, 1991), pp. 50-51; and "America's Peace Dividend," Cato Institute White Paper, August 7, 1990.

[3] For comparative gross domestic product (GDP) and military spending figures for the G-7 members, see International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance, 1991- 1992 (London: Brassey's, 1991), pp. 19, 52, 55, 58, 63, 75, 165.

[4] For a more detailed discussion of those points, see Ted Galen Carpenter, "The New World Disorder," Foreign

Policy 84 (Fall 1991): 24-39.

[5] "State of the World in the 1990s," U.S. Institute of Peace Journal, February 1991, p. 3.

[6] Philip Shenon, "Baker Asks Asians to Move Warily on New Pacts," New York Times, July 25, 1991, p. A14.

[7] Doug Bandow, "Leaving Korea," Foreign Policy 77 (Winter 1989-90): 77-93, and "Unfreezing Korea," National Interest 25 (Fall 1991): 51-58; and Marcus Corbin, "Mission Accomplished in Korea: Bringing U.S. Troops Home," Defense Moni tor 19, no. 2 (Washington: Center for Defense Information, 1990): 1-6.

[8] For a more detailed discussion, see Ted Galen Carpenter, "South Korea: A Vital or Peripheral U.S. Security Interest?" in The U.S.-South Korean Alliance: Time for a Change, ed. Doug Bandow and Ted Galen Carpenter (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1992), pp. 1-16.

[9] T. R. Reid, "Two Koreas Reach Accord Banning Nuclear Weapons," Washington Post, December 1, 1991, p. A1. The lack of a reliable inspection provision is a major defect in that agreement. For a more detailed discussion of the problem posed by North Korea's possible nuclear ambitions, see Doug Bandow, "Defusing the North Korean Bomb," Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing no. 14, December 16, 1991.

[10] Alan Tonelson, "What is the National Interest?" Atlantic, July 1991, pp. 35-52.

[11] Paul Blustein, "Europe's Rebuff on Soviet Aid Challenges U.S.," Washington Post, October 15, 1991, p. D1; and Hobart Rowen, "The Lesson from Bangkok: U.S. Losing Clout," Washington Post, October 27, 1991, p. H1.

[12] The commitment to liberal trade and immigration policies is a striking and extremely significant difference between the concept of strategic independence and the "America First" policies of Pat Buchanan and other nationalists. See Patrick J. Buchanan, "America First--and Second, and Third," National Interest 19 (Spring 1990): 77-82.

[13] Indeed, those suspicions are already evident. A prominent columnist for the Yomiuri Shimbun noted that some U.S. officials seemed to view the presence of American forces as necessary to assure Japan's good behavior, even as demands in the United States were growing that Japan pay more for those forces. The Japanese people, he warned, "cannot feel good about paying for a watchdog that watches them." Kenneth B. Pyle, "The Japanese Question," in Japan and the World: Considerations for U.S. Policymakers (Seattle: Na tional Bureau of Asian and Soviet Research, 1990), p. 7.

[14] See "America's Peace Dividend," pp. 55-64.