

# Cato Handbook *for* Policymakers

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## **65. Restoring Prudence and Restraint in U.S. Foreign Policy**

### ***Policymakers should***

- question the key assumptions that have guided U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War;
- have a better appreciation for the limits and unintended consequences of the use of U.S. military power;
- be mindful of the American people's attitudes on foreign policy, including their deep skepticism of land wars in the Middle East and resentment of the free-riding and reckless behavior of allies in Europe and Asia; and
- adopt a foreign policy, consistent with the nation's founding traditions, that capitalizes on America's key advantages and is better aligned with public sentiment today.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has embraced a heavily interventionist and increasingly militaristic foreign policy. The belief in this grand strategy among foreign policy elites only accelerated after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This strategy, known loosely as liberal hegemony or international primacy, purports to use U.S. military power to shape the international order, as opposed to merely defending the United States and its vital interests.

Some experts, however, have long questioned the wisdom of primacy. Their voices are now being heard, even in policymaking circles, as the high costs and dubious benefits of this policy come into sharper focus. They argue that primacy is built on flawed assumptions and is ultimately counterproductive to U.S. safety. By discouraging other countries from doing more to defend themselves and their interests, primacy imposes excessive costs on American taxpayers and unnecessary risks on U.S. troops.

Meanwhile, primacy increases the likelihood that the United States will be drawn into wars that do not serve U.S. vital security interests.

The United States should adopt a different grand strategy, one that maintains a superior defense capability focused on advancing American security. Restraint takes advantage of America's essential security and favorable strategic position. It also recognizes that excessive intervention—especially the use of military force—unleashes a host of unintended consequences that often undermines U.S. national security. Restraining the impulse to intervene militarily or diplomatically when U.S. vital interests are not threatened would reduce the likelihood that we will be drawn into foolish wars and would also provide a powerful incentive for allies to share the burdens of defense.

### ***The Problem with Primacy***

The object of U.S. foreign policy in the post–Cold War world, according to a Pentagon planning document prepared in 1992, was to “prevent the emergence of a new rival.” U.S. military power would not merely deter attacks against the United States, but would also deter potential challengers, including traditional U.S. allies such as Germany and Japan, from aspiring to play a larger role in their region, or globally.

Several years later, Robert Kagan and William Kristol made the case for “benevolent global hegemony,” their particular brand of primacy. They called for frequent military interventions to topple “rising dictators and hostile ideologies” and were especially keen to reject the idea that the U.S. military should focus on defending the United States. Instead, they supported going to war even “when we cannot prove that a narrowly construed ‘vital interest’ of the United States is at stake.”

At least four key assumptions underlie primacy. First, primacy holds that technology has rendered moot our traditional geographic advantages: friendly and weak neighbors to the north and south, and wide oceans to the east and west. The world is plagued by disparate and urgent threats. Any problem, anywhere, *could* threaten America in the future. Therefore, U.S. national security policy under primacy aims to prevent all fires before they start. If that fails, the U.S. military is prepared to stomp them out.

Second, primacy asserts that the United States must take upon itself the burden of defending allies around the world. Though such a strategy can encourage free riding, primacy advocates are more worried by the prospect that allies' self-defense efforts might fail, necessitating more costly U.S. intervention later and under less favorable circumstances. U.S. security

guarantees, the primacists say, tamp down the natural inclination of states to want to provide security for themselves, thus preventing allies from arms buildups that might unsettle their neighbors and perhaps even unleash regional arms races.

A third assumption undergirding primacy is the belief that the proper functioning of the global economic system requires a single dominant state to enforce the rules of the road. Because the health of the U.S. economy depends upon a healthy global economy, primacy ensures both our physical and economic security.

Finally, primacy ascribes a high level of effectiveness to the use of military force. Beyond the deterrent and coercive effects of preponderant military power, primacists believe that military force is the solution to a wide range of foreign policy problems. Since the 1990s the United States has used its military to provide humanitarian aid, topple governments, impose democracy, help rebuild national economies, do police work and peacekeeping, and of course find and kill members of terrorist groups. Despite the length of that list, however, many primacists believe the United States should be using military force in even more places than it is presently.

The result of primacy's core assumptions is an expansive definition of American national interests that encourages aggressive behavior and generates high costs without adding to America's national security. The American response to 9/11 has cost the United States somewhere between \$4 and \$6 trillion to date as the "war on terror" spread from Afghanistan to Iraq to Somalia, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Pakistan. Meanwhile, the men and women in our military are regularly deployed far from our shores, and they have often paid a terrible price. Thousands have been killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and tens of thousands have been injured. Nearly a million veterans have registered for disability claims from these two wars.

Such sacrifices might be justified if they obtained the fundamental object of *any* nation's foreign policy: security. Tragically, the United States has little progress to point to for all its efforts. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was born from the chaos in Iraq after the U.S. invasion, the number of jihadists and terrorist attacks in the Middle East has exploded since 2001, and all the countries in which the United States has engaged militarily are in shambles. Rather than solve problems, the primacist approach toward terrorism and the Middle East has made things worse while creating new enemies and giving more people an incentive to conduct terrorist attacks against the United States.

## ***The Benefits of Restraint***

In stark contrast, the strategy of restraint is premised on very different assumptions about the way the world works. First, the restraint perspective asserts that the United States enjoys a fundamentally benign security environment. The fears that drive primacy's hyperactivity are mostly exaggerated or overblown. Technology has not evaporated the seas. Large land armies cannot invade and occupy the United States. Meanwhile, potential challengers such as China or Russia face a number of problems that will constrain their ability to cause trouble, especially in the Western Hemisphere.

In other critical respects, technology enhances U.S. security. Nuclear weapons are a powerful deterrent against state actors with return addresses. Meanwhile, precision weapons and special operations forces can be used against terrorists and nonstate actors. The hard part is finding them and stopping them before they act, but intelligence and law enforcement personnel are in the best position to do this. Large land armies stationed in foreign lands may generate more terrorism than they cure.

Second, restraint also departs from primacy on assumptions about allies and regional security efforts. Thanks to favorable geography and other advantages, America doesn't need to maintain regional balances of power to ensure its security. In fact, commitments to reassure nervous allies, deter attacks against others, and use the military to fight our allies' enemies if deterrence fails pose a number of important challenges. Alliances, especially with countries in dangerous neighborhoods, can inadvertently increase the likelihood of conflict, as well as the likelihood of American involvement. Allies are often more willing to confront powerful rivals than they would be if they were responsible for their own defense, a classic case of moral hazard, or what Barry Posen at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology calls "reckless driving." There have always been dangers in the world, and there always will be. But primacy compounds the problem by essentially making everyone else's problems our own.

Third, restraint takes seriously the importance of global engagement through trade but rejects the primacists' claim that such economic interactions can only occur under the American security umbrella. The international economic order is remarkably resilient. Temporary supply or demand disruptions occur all the time. Natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes, or human-caused mischief such as war or banditry, can cut off the flow of oil from a particular refinery, for example, or threaten shipping through critical strategic waterways. But markets adapt. Producers

respond to incentives and bring new sources of supply online. Supply routes can also be adjusted, circumventing closed or threatened transit corridors. Consumers adjust as well, substituting products as the price and availability change. Meanwhile, primacy's frequent wars have disrupted markets as much or more than the terrorists and rogue states have.

Finally, restraint also challenges primacy's confidence in the effectiveness of military force. A review of the past 20 years reveals that, although military force has been highly effective for achieving military objectives, its effectiveness in nonmilitary domains is extremely limited. Spreading democracy, nation building, resolving civil wars, and fighting terrorism are all well beyond the capabilities of even the American military. Moreover, as the experience in the Middle East since 9/11 has shown, military intervention can also make things worse by causing chaos and instability, creating new enemies, and fostering resentment among foreign publics.

A restraint-oriented grand strategy would be very different from the current American strategy. It would focus on defending U.S. vital interests, maintaining a force capable of deploying abroad when the need arises, and restraining the impulse to use that military power when U.S. vital interests are not directly engaged. And it would call on others to deal with urgent threats to their national security before they threaten their region or the globe.

## **Conclusion**

American grand strategy should flow from an assessment of strategic realities. Primacists' assessment of these realities has been faulty. As a result, the pursuit of primacy has been the biggest threat to American security and its national interests since the end of the Cold War. Primacy is costly, dangerous, unnecessary, and counterproductive. In inflation-adjusted dollars, the United States annually spends more on its military today than during an average Cold War year. The United States accounts for nearly 40 percent of the world's military spending even though Americans produce just over 20 percent of global economic output and represent just 5 percent of the world's population. We spend more than twice as much on national security as China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—combined.

In contrast, a strategy of restraint would allow the United States to reap the benefits of its benign security environment at much lower costs in lives and national treasure. Withdrawing from the painful and expensive history lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq and staying out of other local

conflicts will save American lives and the tens of billions of dollars spent each year. Letting its allies take responsibility for their own security will reduce the chances that the United States gets drawn into another nation's conflicts. A commitment to self-defense and diplomacy rather than confrontation and military force will help the United States regain much of the moral high ground and soft power that it has lost over the past two decades.

Beyond these points, restraint is consistent with U.S. foreign policy as it was practiced for most of the nation's history. For over a century, U.S. policymakers and diplomats followed George Washington's guidance from his Farewell Address: "The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations," he explained, "is in extending our *commercial* relations to have with them as little *political* connection as possible." Washington and the other Founders desired amicable relations with other countries, were anxious to trade with others, and hoped to welcome immigrants to our shores. But they were equally anxious to avoid foreign wars.

Their advice would still serve us well today. A wise grand strategy in the 21st century must take account of the resources available to execute it. It should prioritize threats and contemplate the optimal tools for addressing them. The ends are often more malleable than the ways and means. Primacy pretends that they are not. It fails to prioritize, predicated as it is on the notion that any threat, anywhere, is a matter of urgent concern for the United States. That view requires a massive, active military, one even more expensive and more active than the one we have today.

In the current domestic political context, in which U.S. federal government spending is rising faster than revenues, increasing the resources going to the Pentagon entails telling the American people to accept cuts in popular domestic programs, higher taxes, more debt, or all of these things. Primacy suggests that these difficult choices cannot be avoided. It expects Americans to make sacrifices while our allies continue to neglect their defenses and maintain their bloated domestic spending programs.

Such an approach is, unsurprisingly, deeply unpopular with the American people. "Defending our allies' security" ranked near the bottom of Americans' foreign policy priorities, tied with "limiting climate change," in the Chicago Council on Global Affairs' most recent report on American public opinion and foreign policy.

After years of war in the Middle East with no end in sight and little to show for it but pain and more terrorism, the overwhelming majority of Americans now believe that neither the Afghanistan nor the Iraq invasion

was worth the costs. The number of Americans who believe that the United States should mind its own business internationally is near an all-time high. Though Americans certainly appreciate and want the United States to maintain superior military capability, most believe that few situations justify the sort of military intervention that has characterized the past 20 years of American foreign policy. Absent a clear and present threat to national security, the public prefers diplomacy and other tools over the use of force as a means of dealing with international problems.

Rather than clinging stubbornly to an unnecessary and unwise strategy of primacy, policymakers should reconsider America's global policing role, encourage other countries to defend themselves and their interests, and bring the object of our foreign policy in line with the public's wishes.

### ***Suggested Readings***

- Mandelbaum, Michael. *Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Mearsheimer, John J., and Stephen M. Walt. "The Case for Offshore Balancing." *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July–August 2016).
- Pew Research Center. "Public Uncertain, Divided over America's Place in the World." May 5, 2016.
- Posen, Barry R. *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014.
- Preble, Christopher A., and John Mueller, eds. *A Dangerous World? Threat Perception and U.S. National Security*. Washington: Cato Institute, 2014.

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