

# In Defense of Primacy

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THE MIDTERM elections this November mark the unofficial commencement of the 2008 presidential campaign, and over the next two years, Americans will begin to contemplate and debate the legacy of George W. Bush. Among the more contentious elements of the Bush legacy has been the conduct of foreign policy. While some have focused on the operational mistakes of the Bush Administration, others have argued that its overall orientation—what I would describe as the maintenance of American primacy—is itself flawed and counterproductive to long-term American national interests.

A grand strategy based on American primacy means ensuring the United States stays the world's number one power—the diplomatic, economic and military leader. Those arguing against primacy claim that the United States should retrench, either because the United States lacks the power to maintain its primacy and should withdraw from its global commitments, or because the maintenance of primacy will lead the United States into the trap of “imperial overstretch.” In the previous

issue of *The National Interest*, Christopher Layne warned of these dangers of primacy and called for retrenchment.<sup>1</sup>

Those arguing for a grand strategy of retrenchment are a diverse lot. They include isolationists, who want no foreign military commitments; selective engagers, who want U.S. military commitments to centers of economic might; and offshore balancers, who want a modified form of selective engagement that would have the United States abandon its landpower presence abroad in favor of relying on airpower and seapower to defend its interests.

But retrenchment, in any of its guises, must be avoided. If the United States adopted such a strategy, it would be a profound strategic mistake that would lead to far greater instability and war in the world, imperil American security and deny the United States and its allies the benefits of primacy.

There are two critical issues in any discussion of America's grand strategy: *Can* America remain the dominant state? *Should* it strive to do this? America can remain dominant due to its prodigious military, economic and soft power capabilities. The totality of that equation of power answers the first issue. The United States has overwhelming military capabilities and wealth in comparison to other

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<sup>1</sup>Christopher Layne, “Impotent Power?,” *The National Interest*, No. 85 (Sept./Oct. 2006).

states or likely potential alliances. Barring some disaster or tremendous folly, that will remain the case for the foreseeable future. With few exceptions, even those who advocate retrenchment acknowledge this.

So the debate revolves around the desirability of maintaining American primacy. Proponents of retrenchment focus a great deal on the costs of U.S. action—but they fail to realize what is good about American primacy. The price and risks of primacy are reported in newspapers every day; the benefits that stem from it are not.

A GRAND strategy of ensuring American primacy takes as its starting point the protection of the U.S. homeland and American global interests. These interests include ensuring that critical resources like oil flow around the world, that the global trade and monetary regimes flourish and that Washington's worldwide network of allies is reassured and protected. Allies are a great asset to the United States, in part because they shoulder some of its burdens. Thus, it is no surprise to see NATO in Afghanistan or the Australians in East Timor.

In contrast, a strategy based on retrenchment will not be able to achieve these fundamental objectives of the United States. Indeed, retrenchment will make the United States less secure than the present grand strategy of primacy. This is because threats will exist no matter what role America chooses to play in international politics. Washington cannot call a "time out", and it cannot hide from threats. Whether they are terrorists, rogue states or rising powers, history shows that threats must be confronted. Simply by declaring that the United States is "going home", thus abandoning its commitments or making unconvincing half-pledges to defend its interests and allies, does not mean that others will

respect American wishes to retreat. To make such a declaration implies weakness and emboldens aggression. In the anarchic world of the animal kingdom, predators prefer to eat the weak rather than confront the strong. The same is true of the anarchic world of international politics. If there is no diplomatic solution to the threats that confront the United States, then the conventional and strategic military power of the United States is what protects the country from such threats.

And when enemies must be confronted, a strategy based on primacy focuses on engaging enemies overseas, away from American soil. Indeed, a key tenet of the Bush Doctrine is to attack terrorists far from America's shores and not to wait while they use bases in other countries to plan and train for attacks against the United States itself. This requires a physical, on-the-ground presence that cannot be achieved by offshore balancing.

Indeed, as Barry Posen has noted, U.S. primacy is secured because America, at present, commands the "global commons"—the oceans, the world's airspace and outer space—allowing the United States to project its power far from its borders, while denying those common avenues to its enemies. As a consequence, the costs of power projection for the United States and its allies are reduced, and the robustness of the United States' conventional and strategic deterrent capabilities is increased.<sup>2</sup> This is not an advantage that should be relinquished lightly.

A remarkable fact about international politics today—in a world where American primacy is clearly and unambiguously on display—is that countries want to align themselves with the United States. Of course, this is not out of any sense of

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<sup>2</sup>Barry R. Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony", *International Security* (Summer 2003).

altruism, in most cases, but because doing so allows them to use the power of the United States for their own purposes—their own protection, or to gain greater influence.

Of 192 countries, 84 are allied with America—their security is tied to the United States through treaties and other informal arrangements—and they include almost all of the major economic and military powers. That is a ratio of almost 17 to one (85 to five), and a big change from the Cold War when the ratio was about 1.8 to one of states aligned with the United States versus the Soviet Union. Never before in its history has this country, or any country, had so many allies.

U.S. primacy—and the bandwagoning effect—has also given us extensive influence in international politics, allowing the United States to shape the behavior of states and international institutions. Such influence comes in many forms, one of which is America's ability to create coalitions of like-minded states to free Kosovo, stabilize Afghanistan, invade Iraq or to stop proliferation through the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). Doing so allows the United States to operate with allies outside of the UN, where it can be stymied by opponents. American-led wars in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq stand in contrast to the UN's inability to save the people of Darfur or even to conduct any military campaign to realize the goals of its charter. The quiet effectiveness of the PSI in dismantling Libya's WMD programs and unraveling the A. Q. Khan proliferation network are in sharp relief to the typically toothless attempts by the UN to halt proliferation.

You can count with one hand countries opposed to the United States. They are the "Gang of Five": China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea and Venezuela. Of course, countries like India, for example, do not agree with all policy choices made by the United States, such as toward Iran, but New Delhi is friendly to Washington.

Only the "Gang of Five" may be expected to consistently resist the agenda and actions of the United States.

China is clearly the most important of these states because it is a rising great power. But even Beijing is intimidated by the United States and refrains from openly challenging U.S. power. China proclaims that it will, if necessary, resort to other mechanisms of challenging the United States, including asymmetric strategies such as targeting communication and intelligence satellites upon which the United States depends. But China may not be confident those strategies would work, and so it is likely to refrain from testing the United States directly for the foreseeable future because China's power benefits, as we shall see, from the international order U.S. primacy creates.

The other states are far weaker than China. For three of the "Gang of Five" cases—Venezuela, Iran, Cuba—it is an anti-U.S. regime that is the source of the problem; the country itself is not intrinsically anti-American. Indeed, a change of regime in Caracas, Tehran or Havana could very well reorient relations.

**T**HROUGHOUT HISTORY, peace and stability have been great benefits of an era where there was a dominant power—Rome, Britain or the United States today. Scholars and statesmen have long recognized the irenic effect of power on the anarchic world of international politics.

Everything we think of when we consider the current international order—free trade, a robust monetary regime, increasing respect for human rights, growing democratization—is directly linked to U.S. power. Retrenchment proponents seem to think that the current system can be maintained without the current amount of U.S. power behind it. In that they are dead wrong and need to be reminded of one of history's most significant lessons: Appalling things happen when interna-

tional orders collapse. The Dark Ages followed Rome's collapse. Hitler succeeded the order established at Versailles. Without U.S. power, the liberal order created by the United States will end just as assuredly. As country and western great Ral Donner sang: "You don't know what you've got (until you lose it)."

Consequently, it is important to note what those good things are. In addition to ensuring the security of the United States and its allies, American primacy within the international system causes many positive outcomes for Washington and the world. The first has been a more peaceful world. During the Cold War, U.S. leadership reduced friction among many states that were historical antagonists, most notably France and West Germany. Today, American primacy helps keep a number of complicated relationships aligned—between Greece and Turkey, Israel and Egypt, South Korea and Japan, India and Pakistan, Indonesia and Australia. This is not to say it fulfills Woodrow Wilson's vision of ending all war. Wars still occur where Washington's interests are not seriously threatened, such as in Darfur, but a Pax Americana does reduce war's likelihood, particularly war's worst form: great power wars.

Second, American power gives the United States the ability to spread democracy and other elements of its ideology of liberalism. Doing so is a source of much good for the countries concerned as well as the United States because, as John Owen noted on these pages in the Spring 2006 issue, liberal democracies are more likely to align with the United States and be sympathetic to the American worldview.<sup>3</sup> So, spreading democracy helps maintain U.S. primacy. In addition, once states are governed democratically, the likelihood of any type of conflict is significantly reduced. This is not because democracies do not have clashing interests. Indeed they do. Rather, it is because they are more open, more transparent

and more likely to want to resolve things amicably in concurrence with U.S. leadership. And so, in general, democratic states are good for their citizens as well as for advancing the interests of the United States.

Critics have faulted the Bush Administration for attempting to spread democracy in the Middle East, labeling such an effort a modern form of tilting at windmills. It is the obligation of Bush's critics to explain why democracy is good enough for Western states but not for the rest, and, one gathers from the argument, should not even be attempted.

Of course, whether democracy in the Middle East will have a peaceful or stabilizing influence on America's interests in the short run is open to question. Perhaps democratic Arab states would be more opposed to Israel, but nonetheless, their people would be better off. The United States has brought democracy to Afghanistan, where 8.5 million Afghans, 40 percent of them women, voted in a critical October 2004 election, even though remnant Taliban forces threatened them. The first free elections were held in Iraq in January 2005. It was the military power of the United States that put Iraq on the path to democracy. Washington fostered democratic governments in Europe, Latin America, Asia and the Caucasus. Now even the Middle East is increasingly democratic. They may not yet look like Western-style democracies, but democratic progress has been made in Algeria, Morocco, Lebanon, Iraq, Kuwait, the Palestinian Authority and Egypt. By all accounts, the march of democracy has been impressive.

Third, along with the growth in the number of democratic states around the world has been the growth of the global economy. With its allies, the United States has labored to create an economi-

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<sup>3</sup>John M. Owen IV, "Democracy, Realistically", *The National Interest*, No. 83 (Spring 2006).

cally liberal worldwide network characterized by free trade and commerce, respect for international property rights, and mobility of capital and labor markets. The economic stability and prosperity that stems from this economic order is a global public good from which all states benefit, particularly the poorest states in the Third World. The United States created this network not out of altruism but for the benefit and the economic well-being of America. This economic order forces American industries to be competitive, maximizes efficiencies and growth, and benefits defense as well because the size of the economy makes the defense burden manageable. Economic spin-offs foster the development of military technology, helping to ensure military prowess.

Perhaps the greatest testament to the benefits of the economic network comes from Deepak Lal, a former Indian foreign service diplomat and researcher at the World Bank, who started his career confident in the socialist ideology of post-independence India. Abandoning the positions of his youth, Lal now recognizes that the only way to bring relief to desperately poor countries of the Third World is through the adoption of free market economic policies and globalization, which are facilitated through American primacy.<sup>4</sup> As a witness to the failed alternative economic systems, Lal is one of the strongest academic proponents of American primacy due to the economic prosperity it provides.

Fourth and finally, the United States, in seeking primacy, has been willing to use its power not only to advance its interests but to promote the welfare of people all over the globe. The United States is the earth's leading source of positive externalities for the world. The U.S. military has participated in over fifty operations since the end of the Cold War—and most of those missions have been humanitarian in nature. Indeed, the U.S. military is the earth's "911 force"—it serves, *de facto*, as

the world's police, the global paramedic and the planet's fire department. Whenever there is a natural disaster, earthquake, flood, drought, volcanic eruption, typhoon or tsunami, the United States assists the countries in need. On the day after Christmas in 2004, a tremendous earthquake and tsunami occurred in the Indian Ocean near Sumatra, killing some 300,000 people. The United States was the first to respond with aid. Washington followed up with a large contribution of aid and deployed the U.S. military to South and Southeast Asia for many months to help with the aftermath of the disaster. About 20,000 U.S. soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines responded by providing water, food, medical aid, disease treatment and prevention as well as forensic assistance to help identify the bodies of those killed. Only the U.S. military could have accomplished this Herculean effort. No other force possesses the communications capabilities or global logistical reach of the U.S. military. In fact, UN peacekeeping operations depend on the United States to supply UN forces.

American generosity has done more to help the United States fight the War on Terror than almost any other measure. Before the tsunami, 80 percent of Indonesian public opinion was opposed to the United States; after it, 80 percent had a favorable opinion of America. Two years after the disaster, and in poll after poll, Indonesians still have overwhelmingly positive views of the United States. In October 2005, an enormous earthquake struck Kashmir, killing about 74,000 people and leaving three million homeless. The U.S. military responded immediately, diverting helicopters fighting the War on Terror in nearby Afghanistan to bring relief as soon as possible. To help those in need, the United States also provided financial aid to Pakistan; and, as one might

<sup>4</sup>Deepak Lal, *In Praise of Empires: Globalization and Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

expect from those witnessing the munificence of the United States, it left a lasting impression about America. For the first time since 9/11, polls of Pakistani opinion have found that more people are favorable toward the United States than unfavorable, while support for Al-Qaeda dropped to its lowest level. Whether in Indonesia or Kashmir, the money was well-spent because it helped people in the wake of disasters, but it also had a real impact on the War on Terror. When people in the Muslim world witness the U.S. military conducting a humanitarian mission, there is a clearly positive impact on Muslim opinion of the United States. As the War on Terror is a war of ideas and opinion as much as military action, for the United States humanitarian missions are the equivalent of a blitzkrieg.

**T**HERE IS no other state, group of states or international organization that can provide these global benefits. None even comes close. The United Nations cannot because it is riven with conflicts and major cleavages that divide the international body time and again on matters great and trivial. Thus it lacks the ability to speak with one voice on salient issues and to act as a unified force once a decision is reached. The EU has similar problems. Does anyone expect Russia or China to take up these responsibilities? They may have the desire, but they

do not have the capabilities. Let's face it: for the time being, American primacy remains humanity's only practical hope of solving the world's ills.

While the benefits of American primacy are considerable, no country can ever escape from the iron law of Economics 101—there is no free lunch. American primacy is no exception. Leadership requires that the United States incur costs and run risks not borne by other countries. These costs can be stark and brutal, and they have to be faced directly by proponents of primacy. It means that some Americans will die in the service of their country. These are the costs, and they are significant. Americans should be conscious of them and use them in their contemplation of the value of primacy. Additionally, the costs of primacy must impose upon American policy-makers a sharp focus and prudence concerning how they wield American power. Equally, all Americans should be aware of the benefits that flow from primacy and that they enjoy.

While primacy's advantages and costs must be weighed objectively and solemnly, the scholars who are proclaiming that the sky is falling, primacy is doomed and America must retrench have to confront the reality of U.S. power. The world is a long way from seeing the end of American primacy, and it is in America's interest—and the world's—to have it last as long as possible. □

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