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Dominate the World

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Why America Shouldn't Dominate the World

Stephen Wertheim

The collapse of the Soviet Union revealed the bankruptcy of international communism. In time, the absence of a Cold War foe also exposed the bankruptcy of Washington's global ambitions. Freed from major challengers, the United States had an unprecedented chance to shape international politics according to its wishes. It could have chosen to live in harmony with the world, pulling back its armed forces and deploying them only for vital purposes. It could have helped build a world of peace, strengthening the laws and institutions that constrain war and that most other states welcome. From this foundation of security and goodwill, the United States could have exercised leadership on the already visible challenges ahead, including climate change and the concentration of ungoverned wealth.

Instead, Washington did the opposite. It adopted a grand strategy that gave pride of place to military threats and methods, and it constructed a form of global integration that served the immediate interests of a few but imperiled the long-term interests of the many. At best, these were

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mistaken priorities. At worst, they turned the United States into a destructive actor in the world. Rather than practice and cultivate peace, Washington pursued armed domination and launched futile wars in Afghanistan in 2001, in Iraq in 2003, and in Libya in 2011. These actions created more enemies than they defeated. They killed hundreds of thousands of civilians and overextended a generation of U.S. service members. They damaged laws and institutions that stabilize the world and the United States. They made the American people less safe.

As the United States inflated military threats and then poured resources into countering them, it also failed to provide for the global common good. Although it has led some laudable efforts to address the AIDS pandemic and climate change, the overall record is grim. Since 1990, the United States, despite having only four percent of the global population, has emitted about 20 percent of the world's total carbon dioxide, the main contributor to climate change. Although China is now the world's top emitter, the United States' emissions per capita remain more than twice as high as China's. American leaders have alternated between denying the problem and taking insufficient steps to solve it. It remains unclear whether humanity can prevent the overall global temperature from rising to between 1.5 and 2.0 degrees Celsius over preindustrial levels; if not, the damage may prove irreversible, and fires, droughts, and floods may proliferate.

Meanwhile, the economic growth that has contributed to climate change has not benefited enough people. True, extreme poverty has plummeted globally since the early 1990s. This spectacular achievement is substantially the result of

growth in China and India, on terms accepted but hardly defined by the United States. In the same period, however, the share of income accruing to the wealthiest one percent of the world's population has steadily climbed, whereas that of the bottom 50 percent has stagnated. The rest of the world, including the vast majority of Americans, has actually lost ground. Wealth is now concentrated to the point that an estimated 11.5 percent of global GDP lies offshore, untaxed and unaccountable. The populist revolts of the past few years were a predictable result. And American leaders bear direct responsibility for these outcomes, having spearheaded an economic order that puts capital first.

U.S. President Donald Trump often portrays himself as breaking with the basic pattern of recent American foreign policy. Many of his detractors also see him that way. In truth, Trump has carried forward and even intensified the post-Cold War agenda of his predecessors: spare no expense for military hegemony, and find little to spare for the earth's climate or the well-being of anyone who is not wealthy. Trump stands out chiefly because he describes this agenda as national aggrandizement rather than farsighted international leadership. In this regard, he has a point.

Washington's post-Cold War strategy has failed. The United States should abandon the quest for armed primacy in favor of protecting the planet and creating more opportunity for more people. It needs a grand strategy for the many.

THE WAR MACHINE

Both champions and critics of U.S. grand strategy after the Cold War have christened the project "liberal hegemony." But American objectives and methods

were always more hegemonic than liberal. Despite diverging over whether and how to promote liberalism, U.S. policymakers have for nearly three decades converged around the premise that Pentagon planners set forth in 1992: the United States should maintain a military superiority so overwhelming that it would dissuade allies and rivals alike from challenging Washington's authority. That superiority quickly became an end unto itself. By seeking dominance instead of merely defense, the strategy of primacy plunged the United States into a downward spiral: American actions generated antagonists and enemies, who in turn made primacy more dangerous to pursue.

For most of the 1990s, the costs of this strategy remained somewhat hidden. With Russia flattened and China poor, the United States could simultaneously reduce its defense spending and expand NATO, launch military interventions in the former Yugoslavia and for the first time station tens of thousands of troops in the Middle East. Yet by the end of the decade, U.S. dominance had begun to generate blowback. Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda terrorist group declared war on the United States in 1996, citing the U.S. military's presence in Saudi Arabia as their top grievance; two years later, al Qaeda bombed the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing 224 people. U.S. policymakers, for their part, were already exaggerating the threat posed by weak "rogue states" and gearing up for ambitious military interventions to promote democracy and human rights. These pathologies shaped Washington's overly militarized reaction to the 9/11 attacks, as the United States entered into successive



Fuel to the fire: American troops in Kuwait, February 2010

conflicts in which its capabilities and interests did not exceed those of local actors. The result was endless war.

Now, as the United States struggles to extricate itself from the Middle East, China is growing into an economic and political powerhouse and Russia is asserting itself as a spoiler. That outcome is exactly what primacy was supposed to prevent. The rise of a near-peer competitor does not necessarily pose a grave danger to the United States, whose nuclear deterrent secures it from attack.

But clinging to the dream of never-ending primacy will ensure trouble, mandating the containment of rivals and provoking insecurity and aggression in return. China has yet to undertake a costly bid for military dominance in East Asia, let alone the world, but U.S. actions could push Beijing in that direction.

BEARING THE COSTS

Primacy has not merely failed to provide security as it is narrowly defined. It has also damaged the environment, undercut

the economic interests of most Americans, and destabilized democracy. The U.S. military consumes more oil and produces more greenhouse gases than any other institution on earth, according to Brown University's Costs of War Project. In 2017, the U.S. military's emissions exceeded those of entire industrialized countries, such as Denmark and Sweden.

Nor does primacy offer a net economic benefit. From the 1940s through the 1960s, U.S. military preponderance lubricated international capitalism by containing communism and facilitating the expansion of the dollar, to which all other currencies were pegged. But after the collapse of the Bretton Woods monetary system and then of the Soviet Union, currencies were floated, and global markets were integrated. As a result, U.S. military strength became largely detached from the international economic order. Today, the status of the U.S. dollar as a reserve currency, which allows Americans to borrow cheaply, rests largely on path dependence, the currency's stability, and the dearth of attractive alternatives—factors that no longer rely on the global projection of U.S. force that helped usher them in originally. And the quest for primacy is now leading the United States to erode its own financial position by maintaining unnecessary hostilities with states such as Iran, imposing crippling sanctions on them and forcing third parties who use the dollar to follow suit. These actions have compelled European states to seek alternatives to the dollar and have driven down the dollar's share in global foreign exchange reserves.

The U.S. military contributes to global commerce by protecting the sea-lanes through which goods (including

oil) flow. But doing so does not require globe-spanning dominance; it requires effective local partners to handle day-to-day tasks, with a light U.S. air and naval presence that can be reinforced if and when those partners cannot overcome a genuine challenge to maritime security. Whatever economic benefits primacy may indirectly yield, what is certain is that year after year, the United States spends half of its federal discretionary budget to fund a military that is costlier than the next seven largest armed forces combined. Military spending is one of the least efficient ways to create jobs, ranking behind tax cuts and spending on education, health care, infrastructure, and clean energy. The estimated \$6.4 trillion poured into the "war on terror" so far could have rebuilt communities across the United States that were devastated by the financial crisis and the recession that followed. Now, many members of those communities resent the political elites who allowed them to crumble.

Primacy has also corroded the U.S. political system, which has in turn produced irresponsible leaders to wield primacy's power. During the Cold War, the need to counter a threatening adversary sometimes worked to unify disparate political factions and social groups in the United States. The post-Cold War quest for primacy offers a perverse contrast. The United States has acquired a kaleidoscope of foreign enemies, whom U.S. officials and the mass media have encouraged the American public to fear and punish. Small wonder that in the second decade of the war on terror, a demagogue was able to turn hatred of foreigners into a premise that propelled him to the presidency, dividing the country further still.

HOW TO FIX GLOBALIZATION

Americans and their leaders must act now to end primacy's downward spiral. This will not require overturning the familiar definitions of fundamental U.S. interests: security for the nation and its people, prosperity for all, and the preservation of the constitutional republic. But those interests must be related to the domestic and international realities of 2020, rather than to those of 1947.

The United States should seek to transform globalization into a governable and sustainable force, one that protects the environment, spreads wealth equitably, and promotes peace. Such an agenda would bring Americans together and bring their country into a healthy alignment with the rest of the world. Climate change affects everyone, and two of the very few trends common to both U.S. political parties are mounting support for economic progressivism and a profound wariness of military intervention. A strategy to transform globalization would also transcend the current impasse between "America first" nationalism and nostalgia for the U.S.-led "liberal international order." The former is implacably hostile to the outside world (and hurts the United States by defining it in opposition to others rather than in terms of itself and its interests). The latter submerges U.S. interests in a vague abstraction (and hurts the world by subordinating everyone to U.S. leadership). A better approach would be to focus on definable interests and major threats that genuinely require action across borders.

First among these is climate change. Nothing better encapsulates the backwardness of U.S. priorities than the fact that Washington directs at least

\$81 billion per year to its military to ensure the abundant supply of cheap oil around the globe, according to *Securing America's Future Energy*, a clean energy advocacy group. The United States should work to reduce the world's reliance on fossil fuels rather than underwrite it.

The world still has a chance to avert the most severe climate impacts. To set the stage, the United States should use its market power and its international influence. At home, it should vastly increase investment in the Department of Energy's research-and-development agency, levy taxes on producers and importers of carbon-emitting fuels, and expand credits for electric vehicles and other renewables. At the same time, the United States should adopt a range of green regulatory standards on which to condition foreign access to its large market, along the lines of the tailpipe emissions requirements that the Obama administration imposed on imported automobiles.

Globally, the United States should seek much more far-reaching results than the voluntary national emissions standards established by the Paris climate accord in 2015. After rejoining that agreement, Washington should ratify the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol, which calls for vastly limiting the use of hydrofluorocarbons, and should insist that multilateral development agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, support only those projects that would lead to fewer emissions.

The United States should also rally the industrialized world to provide developing countries with technology and financing to bypass fossil fuels. Coercion will be less effective, and less

just, than provision. Washington can jump-start this initiative by investing at least \$200 billion in the UN Green Climate Fund and opening discussions for debt relief with countries in the global South.

A sticking point would be China, which spews by far the most carbon dioxide of any country—over a quarter of the global total—but also leads the world in mass-producing low-carbon energy technologies. The highest priority in U.S. relations with China should be to green Chinese behavior, an objective that would preclude a policy of Cold War–style containment. Washington should encourage Beijing to keep innovating renewable technologies, in part by stepping up U.S. research and development, and should push China to implement those technologies in its domestic energy production and international development practices.

A new U.S. strategy would not just green the global economy; it would also democratize it. As Joseph Stiglitz, Todd Tucker, and Gabriel Zucman recently argued in these pages, the next U.S. president should launch a campaign to combat global tax evasion by backing a global registry to reveal the true owners of all assets and by preventing corporations from shifting money to subsidiaries in low-tax jurisdictions. Those moves alone would increase U.S. tax revenue by approximately 15 percent. Still more revenue would come from establishing a global minimum tax to end race-to-the-bottom tax havens. Washington could use that revenue to ensure that U.S. workers benefit from the transition away from fossil fuels. In this way, environmental protection, economic justice, and the restoration of trust in government would proceed in lockstep.

HOW TO END ENDLESS WARS—AND NOT START NEW ONES

It will not suffice, however, to simply lay environmentalist and social democratic initiatives on top of U.S. military primacy, in pursuit of which the United States has formally obligated itself to defend approximately one-third of the world's countries (and informally dozens more) and to maintain an archipelago of more than 800 foreign bases. The United States will also have to demilitarize its foreign policy.

The essential first step would be to end the era of costly and counterproductive warfare that began after the 9/11 attacks. The United States should remove its air and ground forces from Afghanistan within 12 to 18 months and even sooner from Iraq and Syria. It should bring those troops home rather than reposition them elsewhere in the region. Washington should of course try to broker the best possible settlements to the conflicts in those places, and it should continue to provide assistance to the Afghan and Iraqi governments after turning over the appropriate facilities and equipment to them. But the United States should withdraw from these conflict zones even in the absence of credible agreements to end the fighting. Washington lacks the leverage to demand what it could not impose through two decades of warfare. Although withdrawals may set back U.S. allies and partners in the short run, the region must find its own balance of power in order to achieve peace and stability over time.

Indeed, no strategic logic warrants the continuation of the war on terror, which perpetuates itself by producing new enemies. That is why a swift and

sweeping termination would be best. If significant attacks occur, the United States should respond militarily but with clear restrictions regarding whom, where, and for how long it can fight. Its leaders should make a political virtue out of restraint, declaring that the United States will defeat terrorists in part by avoiding the kinds of indiscriminate attacks that militants exploit to swell their coffers and attract new recruits.

Accordingly, the next president should drastically reduce so-called targeted killing operations. “Signature strikes,” in which drones take aim at unidentified persons, should cease immediately because they hit unworthy targets, kill innocent civilians, and cause blowback. Any remaining use of drone strikes should be subject to a more literal conception of “imminent threat” than the elastic definition applied by the Obama administration and further degraded by Trump. Congress, for its part, should replace the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force, which was passed after 9/11, with a far narrower version that allows the president to use force against specific organizations, in specific countries, and for a specific period and prohibits lethal operations against all others. Congress can also dissuade the president from launching unlawful strikes by empowering U.S. federal courts to review after-the-fact lawsuits brought on behalf of victims.

Beyond dismantling the war on terror, the United States should also shed unnecessary nemeses, especially weak states that would not threaten the United States except for its belligerent posture toward them. Take North Korea. Washington should abandon the fantasy that the regime of Kim Jong Un will fully denuclearize as a result of

external pressure; instead, the United States should seek to normalize relations with North Korea and build peace on the peninsula. Doing so would require a step-by-step process in which the United States, acting with its partners, would lift sanctions and offer development assistance in return for North Korea’s accepting arms control measures, including capping its nuclear arsenal, ceasing missile tests and other belligerent actions, and permitting UN inspections. This course offers the best way to address the nuclear threat: it would make North Korea’s intentions less antagonistic and limit its capabilities to the extent feasible. It would also be unlikely to cause proliferation by Japan and South Korea, which have now lived with North Korea’s nuclear capability for 14 years. Although some may be tempted to condition nuclear diplomacy on human rights improvements in North Korea, the regime’s abuses are likely to diminish significantly only if it no longer perceives itself to be besieged.

Iran is another enemy worth losing. The United States should end its grudge match with the Islamic Republic by lifting sanctions and coming back into compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the nuclear deal that Washington and other major powers negotiated with Tehran. That agreement proved not only that diplomacy with Iran is possible but also that it is the most effective method for addressing bilateral tensions. A thirst for vengeance, which seems to be driving U.S. policy toward Iran under Trump, is not a legitimate U.S. interest. In fact, no U.S. interest—not even the goal of preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons—would

warrant war with Iran given that diplomacy with Tehran has worked.

In the rest of the region, Washington should be guided by the maxim “no permanent friends, no permanent enemies.” It should downgrade relations with partners such as Saudi Arabia and make clear that they are responsible for defending themselves. The United States should close nearly all its military bases in the region. Retaining one or two for air and naval forces, perhaps in Bahrain and Qatar, would give Washington what it needs: the ability to ensure access to the maritime commons should a serious threat arise that regional actors cannot handle themselves. More broadly, the United States should cease acting as a partisan in disputes such as Yemen’s civil war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; it would do more to help resolve those fights by relying on diplomacy without taking sides.

HOW TO DEAL WITH CHINA AND RUSSIA

In the past three years, the Trump administration and a flotilla of defense analysts have proposed a strategy of “great-power competition,” which would generally intensify geopolitical contestation in the service of maximizing Washington’s military power. Precisely the opposite is needed. Competition among great powers is inevitable, but it should be a byproduct of underlying interests and is hardly to be desired in its own right. As the United States attempts to elicit cooperation from China and Russia on combating climate change and governing global finance, it should avoid costly military rivalries and ruinous large-scale wars. Washington should therefore significantly

reduce its forward-deployed military presence in Asia and Europe alike, while retaining the ability to intervene if either power truly threatens to become a hostile hegemon in its region.

Despite the rising alarm in Washington, China is not poised to dominate East Asia by force. Having grown in rough proportion to China's economy, the People's Liberation Army remains focused on local issues: defending the Chinese mainland, winning disputes over small border areas and islands, and prevailing in what China sees as its unresolved civil war with the government in Taiwan. A new administration should abandon its predecessors' overreactions to Chinese military expansion. In order to prevent a serious clash in the South China Sea, where Beijing's interests outstrip those of Washington, the United States should extricate itself from maritime jurisdictional disputes and cease freedom-of-navigation operations and surveillance near disputed islands. It is not worth antagonizing China over such issues.

The possibility that China might become more belligerent if it continues to grow stronger is a legitimate concern. To account for this possibility without taking actions that make it more likely, Washington should strengthen the defenses of U.S. allies in Asia in ways that do not provoke China. The United States can provide its allies with so-called anti-access/area-denial capabilities, such as improved surveillance and missile systems, which would severely impede any Chinese attack without signaling an offensive posture. It could then retract its offensive weaponry. In Taiwan, such an approach would fulfill the long-standing U.S. objective of preserving

a peaceful status quo, deterring a Chinese invasion while dissuading Taiwan from thinking it could back its independence aspirations with U.S. forces.

If it took this approach, the United States would still have ample time to mobilize and deploy its forces if China were to turn bellicose. For now, Washington must make a serious bid to secure Beijing's cooperation on core objectives, especially climate change. To attempt to contain China would be a grave mistake, guaranteeing Chinese enmity and directing resources into military escalation instead of environmental cooperation. The United States should clearly prioritize the present danger of an uninhabitable planet above the speculative and manageable prospect of an aggressive peer.

U.S. relations with Russia also require a redesign. Russia, with an economy smaller than that of Italy, is not a credible aspirant to hegemony in Europe and need not pose a security threat to the United States. The fact that, according to a Gallup poll conducted last year, a majority of Americans consider Russia to be a "critical threat" testifies to decades of policy failure, including U.S. provocations (NATO expansion and law-breaking American military interventions) and Russian hostility (culminating in its U.S. election meddling in 2016). The next U.S. president should end this cycle by pursuing a policy that respects Russia's consistent view of its vital interests: preserving its regime, avoiding hostile governments in its "near abroad," and participating in core European security and diplomatic discussions.

Because those objectives align with U.S. interests, the United States should assuage Russian concerns by ending

NATO expansion and rejecting Ukraine's existing bid for membership in the alliance. It should then, in consultation with its allies, begin a ten-year draw-down of U.S. forces stationed in Europe. Most of those troops should return to the United States, although some air and naval forces could remain with the agreement of their hosts. In addition, the United States should encourage Russia and Ukraine to reach a deal whereby Russia would stop backing separatists in eastern Ukraine and Ukraine and the United States would recognize Crimea as part of Russia. Such a settlement would allow the United States to lift many of its sanctions on Russia and lay the foundation for decent relations.

These measures, in addition to being rooted in U.S. interests, would serve to reassure Russia on security issues as the two powers grapple over climate change and financial corruption. Russia relies on oil and gas revenue, and some Russians believe that their country, or the parts of it that are thawing, will benefit commercially from warming temperatures. Russia is also a global leader in money laundering and tax evasion. No U.S. strategy is going to wean Russia off petrodollars or kleptocracy. By minimizing points of friction, however, Washington would make it more likely that Moscow would temper its resistance to international campaigns on the climate and finance. Doing so may even ultimately open the door to mutually beneficial exchanges through scientific research and the transfer of green technologies. At a minimum, U.S. military retrenchment would help prevent Russia from becoming desperate and aggressive as a result of international pressure.

THE CHOICE

The time has come to bid good riddance to the unipolar moment. Over three decades, the United States has extended its military deployments and commitments to the breaking point. Its poor stewardship of globalization has left ordinary Americans and the earth's climate in a similar place. To correct its course, the United States should make the conscious choice to pull back militarily—the better to build a world that is habitable, governable, and prosperous.

The United States must use its power and influence to take on challenges that bombs and bullets cannot fix. This is a task for grand strategy in its broadest sense. More than that, it is a task for politics. A grand strategy for the many must be demanded by the many so that their leaders will pursue the common good. 🌍