

IT IS TIME TO TEMPER OUR EXCESSIVE INTERVENTIONISM

Doug Bandow

Now, a year after the defining moment of the terrorist attacks of 11 September, is an appropriate time to think critically about strategy. One reason is that strategy is critically important. Strategy ultimately determines force structure, deployments, and commitments around the world. It ultimately determines the entire military posture.

Up until about 1914, the United States was a fairly aggressive power, internally and in the Pacific, for trade reasons. It was not terribly interested, however, in the struggles in the Old World, particularly Europe. That changed in World War I, but after that conflict the United States went back to the pattern of a century before, until 1941. After 1941, through World War II and the Cold War, the United States successively fought three hegemonic powers—Nazi Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union. By the end of the Cold War the United States had eliminated all countervailing hegemonies; it is necessary to go back not just to the British Empire but to the Roman Empire to find another time when one power so dominated the globe.

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At a conference at West Point a number of years ago, a member of the audience stood up and said, “I’m tired of this talk about a post–Cold War world. It is still a very dangerous place.” Yes, but dangerous to whom? It is dangerous to many countries, but not to the United States. That fact is the most important reason why this country should rethink its strategy. The U.S. military accounts for roughly a third of military outlay around the globe; adding the spending of

friends and allies makes the figure 70 to 80 percent. The United States spends as much on defense as the next six or seven countries together, most of whom are friends and allies. Its force is the most technologically advanced, the most effective. The Europeans were rather embarrassed about this in the aftermath of the Kosovo War; the common estimate was that they had 10 to 15 percent of the effective combat capability of the United States.

The threats, however, are very different from what they once were. There remains a nuclear threat from the Russians—steadily diminishing in light of the improving relationship with Moscow and recent arms control agreements. Otherwise, the most obvious potential future threats come from China and India—if India decides to develop an intercontinental capability—and from third-world states. The United States certainly can deter the Russians, the Chinese, and the Indians. National missile defense is very useful against rogue states or inadvertent launches by more responsible powers. As for serious conventional threats to the United States—as serious as a Nato–Warsaw Pact conflagration would have been—they are much harder to find. Such threats as exist are primarily to American allies, and not in Europe; the most important involve the Republic of Korea and Taiwan. Further, these potential conflicts are not tied to a hegemonic opponent, as they once were. Threats to allies in the Cold War were related to the Soviet Union and had very different international implications than those of today.

The world is full of civil conflict, guerrilla warfare, and disorder of all sorts. But most of it has very little impact on American security. Most of these embroilments, to the extent they bother anyone, affect not the United States but its allies—and these allies are generally capable of handling the consequences, be it Indonesia and Australia, or the Balkans and Europe. Finally, the United States faces the threat of terrorism made so evident in the attacks of 11 September 2001, but terrorism is not something that is easily dealt with by conventional or nuclear forces. It may grow in the future, but it is a different kind of problem, one that will require different forces and responses.

Today's world, then, marked by American dominance and asymmetric threats, is not the same as that of the Cold War. Yet the United States persists in its Cold War posture, the costs of which dramatically exceed its benefits. One expense is budgetary, the price of an expansive foreign policy. There is also a broader economic burden—the country spends a far larger share of its gross domestic product on the military than do its allies and competitors. Further, the posture brings with it a substantial risk of conflict. American security guarantees can make any particular war less likely, but they ensure that the United States will be involved in any that does break out. In a world without an antagonistic hegemon, such conflicts rarely warrant American intervention. Another price is paid by those in uniform. They carry the burden of constant

deployments on behalf of dubious causes, a prospect that has hurt recruiting and retention. Moreover, there is the risk to life. In the next conflict, the United States might not be as lucky as it was in the Persian Gulf and Kosovo, and as it has been so far in Afghanistan.

Finally, the American homeland itself is at risk. States and groups that cannot confront a superpower in traditional ways resort to terrorism as a form of asymmetrical warfare. The attorney general has repeatedly warned that more terrorist incidents are likely, and the secretary of defense predicts that terrorists will eventually acquire biological, chemical, and perhaps nuclear weapons. If both

are right, the result will be too horrific to contemplate.

Today's changed world, then, calls for fairly significant changes in America's strategy. For example, the United States should not

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treat, as did the so-called Nye Report, a hundred thousand troops in Asia as a "down payment" on a permanent American commitment. It is also not necessary for the United States to remain a dominant member of Nato, with forces on the ground in Europe. With a more appropriate strategy the United States would remain the primary power, the strongest country, but it would not require the vast advantage that it has today, or military involvement around the world.

The underpinnings of a more restrained and unilateral approach would be twofold. One is a philosophical notion regarding the primary responsibility of the U.S. government and, by extension, its role in the world. The principal duty of the U.S. government is to protect the lives, liberties, property, constitutional system, and freedom of the American people—including service members that it commits abroad. The lives of the peoples of other nations, whether of allies or of states in need of help, are important, but the U.S. government does not bear the same responsibility for them. Second, there is a practical concern that should underlie U.S. foreign policy—humility. There is a danger of falling into a hubristic notion that the United States can and should reorder the globe. It is a fatal conceit that one can sit in Washington and decide which faction should win a civil war in the Balkans, what kind of government should emerge in Afghanistan, which groups should live together, and where national borders should run.

It is not at all obvious what is right in such cases. It is also becoming increasingly clear that Washington cannot lastingly enforce its will even when it thinks it does know. Unintended consequences are often deep and long lasting. In the Balkans and Middle East can be seen problems caused at least in part by past U.S. actions, and further complications are likely to result in the future. In addition, incentives are important. If populous and prosperous allies are defended by

others, they probably will not devote as much effort to defend themselves. The effect can be seen in Europe, where a serious debate has emerged between those who argue for a stronger defense capability and others who do not want to spend the money that would be necessary. The same phenomenon is evident also in the Philippines and South Korea.

The policy of defending countries having adversarial relations with their neighbors may affect their behavior in dangerous ways. It may encourage them to adopt riskier strategies. Pakistan may well be emboldened in its running dispute with India by its close relationship with the United States in the campaign against al-Qa'ida and Taliban terrorists on its northern border. By issuing a defense guarantee to Taiwan, Washington may influence Taiwanese decisions about declaring independence over the long term. When the United States backs ethnic separatists, as in Kosovo, with airpower, it should not be surprised if the guerrillas expand their activities. Similarly, the Philippines government has clearly seen its visiting-forces agreement with Washington as a factor in its struggle with China over the Spratly Islands. Such guarantees, or perceived guarantees, may have very important and counterproductive effects; they may draw the United States in where it otherwise would not be involved.

Finally, policies that are perceived as aggressively interventionist may catalyze an opposing coalition. For example, the William Clinton administration was correct in trying to better its relations with India; there had been a debate in India on nuclear weapons policy, in which the hawks wanted an arsenal of several hundred weapons—with an intercontinental capability. The intent was not aggressive, though the implied target was obvious; the idea reflected a reaction to what is perceived as American arrogance. Indeed, the lesson that the chief of staff of the Indian army reportedly drew from the Persian Gulf War was that no nation should go to war with the United States without nuclear weapons. Even the French complain about the United States as a “hyperpower.” Such reactions should be taken into account in developing foreign policy.

What strategy would reflect the reality of America's dominant global presence as well as these two principles, philosophical and practical?

One of the realities is that the United States has the largest, most productive, most technologically advanced economy on earth. That will not change. America is the center of global culture. That is not always beneficial, but it certainly gives the United States enormous influence. People in some of the most remote places on the planet can be found wearing baseball caps, T-shirts, and shorts—all with logos of American companies. The reach of American “soft power” is extraordinary. Further, the United States has an attractive ideology, an

asset that clearly played a role in undermining communism in Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

Having amassed such enormous advantages—quite aside from military predominance—the United States could afford a less overwhelming primacy than it has today. Such a policy would be less expensive and less likely to incur risks that, as the events of 11 September demonstrated, can reach the U.S. homeland. Under a less interventionist policy, Washington would treat world events with a certain distance and detachment, asking not only “What?” but “So what?” The answer may very well be *nothing*. A State Department spokesperson commenting upon a dire event in a distant country—for example, a coup d’état—need simply acknowledge, “It is very sad, but there is nothing we can do about it, nothing that we need to do about it.” The United States should be prepared to ignore, or give only limited attention to, the largely irrelevant conflicts and instability of which the globe is full. It should accept the fact that the world will always have instability—guerrilla warfare, civil conflict, ethnic insurgency, and state failure—and that the United States does not have to try to deal with it all.

The media must not be allowed to direct national policy. Other countries know that CNN, for instance, plays a role in high-level decision making. In 1998, one of the aides to Ibrahim Rugova, the top ethnic Albanian leader, told the author, “We want Nato to get involved. That means we have got to bring the war into the homes of Americans. That means we have got to get on CNN.” Submitting to such manipulation is a very poor way to make policy. Many of these local conflicts are tragic, but they do not implicate vital American interests. It may be advisable to provide logistical support to countries or organizations that do want to get involved—the British in Sierra Leone, France and some of the Francophone countries in Africa, the African Union (replacing the Organization of African Unity), the United Nations. But beyond such narrow involvement, a superpower has, frankly, bigger fish to fry. It was one thing to try to stop bloodshed in Bosnia, for instance; it was quite another to create an artificial state and try to induce three warring parties to live together. The latter was an example of overreach that made no sense from an American standpoint.

The United States should also—and this is very fundamental—expect allies to protect allied interests. Since the Cold War, threats have receded to a level commensurate with the capabilities of allies to deal with them, especially if friendly states felt the slightest pressure to do more on their own behalf. As noted, most of the potential conventional threats around the world are against allies, not the United States; they should take the lead in protecting themselves. If, for example, the Baltic states are to be defended, the European Union should do it. Indeed, at a time when the European Union has a population greater than, and an economy equal to, those of the United States, and when France, Great

Britain, and Germany each spend about as much as the Russians spend on their militaries, there is no need for the United States to continue defending the Europeans. The guarantees given during the Cold War made sense then, but they are not necessary today.

The same calculus applies in Asia. It was correct for the United States to decline to involve itself in a major way in East Timor; that was Australia's problem. The Republic of Korea, with a gross domestic product forty times that of its northern neighbor and twice the population, should expect to defend itself, instead of relying on American backup, fifty years after the initial U.S. deployment. Japan too, despite the disquiet of its neighbors, can do far more to defend itself and its region. Where allies are capable of defending themselves, U.S. commitments to them can be changed.

Perhaps the most likely future threat facing the United States is China, which is the only potential peer competitor. The approach there should be, first, to encourage allies to take the steps

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necessary to defend themselves. Allies should be encouraged to work together; cooperation between countries like Japan and the Republic of Korea, for instance,

needs to improve. Countries like the Philippines need naval and air forces capable of dealing with issues in the South China Sea. Also, countervailing powers should be cultivated. India, for example, is a potential counterweight to China. It is already fulfilling that role in Southeast Asia, in Burma, and in other countries. That is very useful. Third, the United States should trade with the Chinese but control trade in strategic commodities. The relationship with Beijing will not be an easy one; nonetheless, it does not require maintenance of the kind of expensive dominance that the United States has today.

The United States, then, should remain in the background, acting not as an instant meddler but as the ultimate balancer. The long-term goal is to see that immediate threats are handled by allies in the region, that Americans are not called in to deal with local instabilities that are likely to stay in the region. The United States should focus on the big issues—defending the United States, especially its homeland, and preventing the rise of another hegemonic power that would dominate Europe or Asia, as well as confronting the ongoing danger of terrorism.

When it is necessary to act, the United States should be creative. There may well be steps available short of military action. Consider North Korea. Dealing with the North Koreans is difficult; they should certainly be discouraged from becoming a nuclear power. But the ultimate disposition of the peninsula should

be viewed as a chess endgame—one in which the United States has already gained a winning advantage. There is no need for a dramatic, dangerous confrontation. It is necessary only to let the game play out—even, if necessary, with bribes (such as the nuclear-framework accord), which are cheaper than the alternative.

If strategy is adjusted in such ways, it will ultimately be necessary to adjust force structure and deployments as well, especially overseas. Commitments to defend other countries should be replaced with looser cooperative arrangements. There should be fewer deployments, and none in places like the Balkans. Over the long term it will also be necessary to look at transformational issues: informational and asymmetrical warfare, the likely parameters of future conflicts, and how to deal with attempts to exploit American vulnerabilities.

The world is a messy place. It is always going to be messy. Not all of its messes can be cleaned up, and the United States should not try. The United States can and should remain the strongest power on earth, but no longer with the kind of overwhelming power and ubiquitous international involvement that it has today. There are obviously risks in such a course, but there are also risks in trying to impose its will everywhere. There are risks in trying to settle civil wars. There are risks in becoming a party to other countries' disputes. One set of risks has to be balanced against the other. A less interventionist strategy would build on the existing advantages of the United States and offer the nation a better and safer future. It would ultimately give the American people, who fought and won the Cold War, the benefits of victory that they deserve.