

November 2024

Rethink US Grand Strategy

By Christopher Preble

TOPLINE

The overly ambitious foreign policy goals of the United States are not matched with realistic means and effective ways. The bid to maintain primacy — often through the threat or use of force — has stretched the military thin, wasted trillions of dollars, and made Americans less secure.

Rather than doubling down on primacy, the United States should ruthlessly prioritize its foreign policy objectives, with a laser focus on advancing American security, prosperity, and freedom.

THE PROBLEM

U.S. grand strategy is insolvent. The foreign policy goals that the United States has set for itself far exceed the resources most Americans are prepared to expend to have a reasonable chance of achieving them. What's more, the primary tool that the U.S. government has employed in the past several decades — war, or the threat of it — has come up short. The ends, ways, and means of U.S. grand strategy are misaligned, ill-suited to our present era, and often in conflict.

This assessment may seem overly pessimistic, but the evidence is all around us. The American people are disinclined to expend precious resources on foreign adventures that they doubt will advance their security and prosperity. Polling by the Institute for Global Affairs, for example, found that around 65% of Americans favor reduced U.S. military engagement and believe the United States should negotiate with “any and all adversaries” to avoid war.

To be sure, there are important divisions between the two political parties, and even within them. But there is no evidence that a new political coalition lies in wait to be

activated around the premise that more Americans should be fighting more wars in more places.

The step below that threshold — supplying arms to allies and partners as they fight — is also problematic. Despite astronomical Pentagon budgets, the U.S. industrial base has proved incapable of supplying multiple conflicts simultaneously. And the risk that the United States supplying weapons and material to belligerents will eventually lead to Americans becoming directly involved is ever-present. Given Americans' demonstrated aversion to new wars, being “partly in and partly out” is not a comforting alternative.

To put it more succinctly: U.S. grand strategy is writing checks that the body politic will not cash. A dramatic course correction is needed.

ESSENTIAL CONTEXT

Understanding what needs to change begins with understanding how we got here. U.S. grand strategy since the end of the Cold War has been characterized by an attempt to maintain primacy, or what others call deep engagement or liberal hegemony. The foreign policy establishment — both Republican and Democrat alike — still mostly reflects this primacist mindset.

The simplest expression of this mindset came from Madeleine Albright, secretary of state during Bill Clinton's second term. “If we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation,” she told NBC's Matt Lauer. “We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us.”

The primacist vision of U.S. foreign policy is still widely held, despite numerous setbacks to American influence in the intervening quarter century, including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the global financial crisis, and the rise of China and a raft of middle powers. For example, the Biden administration's *National Security Strategy* — released in October 2022 — is wildly ambitious. “The need for American leadership is as great as it has ever been,” Biden declares in his letter introducing the strategy, “There is nothing beyond our capacity.”

The document commits America to “support every country, regardless of size or strength, in exercising the freedom to make choices that serve their interests.” And, after his disastrous debate performance in June 2024, Biden tried to convince ABC's George Stephanopoulos that he was still up to the job by declaring, “I'm running the world.” He allowed that it “sounds like hyperbole, but we are the essential nation of the world. Madeleine Albright was right.”

Such sentiments are not held just by Democrats of a certain generation. The Commission on the National Defense Strategy (NDS), an eight-person panel chosen by Republican and Democratic lawmakers, concluded in 2024 that “U.S. leaders must make the case publicly why ... the United States remains the indispensable nation to maintain peace, stability, and a flourishing economy.”

But the commissioners are mistaken. Primacy is not the right strategy for the United States, and any attempt to rally the public to such a goal is bound to fail.

For one thing, primacy fails to account for the many constraints — both internal and external — on America’s ability to shape the world through military power. The fiscal and budgetary constraints are particularly acute. In 2024, interest payments on the national debt exceeded the Pentagon’s budget — which is also near record highs in absolute terms. Since 2000, U.S. military spending has risen by nearly 50 percent, after adjusting for inflation, and yet even these increases fall far short of what is required to fund a military that is supposed to stop every threat, in every part of the world, all the time.

Though it acknowledges that military spending has grown in recent years, the NDS Commission concludes that such increases have failed to keep pace with an ever-expanding set of missions. The Commission calls for spending far more, and argues that “increased security spending should be accompanied by additional taxes and reforms to entitlement spending.”

The commissioners are careful not to say how much Pentagon spending must rise to meet the mission, but my Stimson colleague Julia Gledhill and I have estimated the cost at between \$5 and \$10 trillion in additional spending over the next decade, on top of the more than \$9.3 trillion that U.S. taxpayers are already projected to spend on the military. At the end of that period, annual Pentagon budgets could approach \$3 trillion.

Such figures are absurdly out of touch with the priorities of the American people. While the U.S. economy is large enough to sustain very high levels of military spending — and has done so — Americans want more of their tax dollars spent on things that improve their lives, including adequate housing, quality and affordable health care, and accessible education.

Meanwhile, older Americans, even those who are relatively affluent, expect politicians to protect Social Security and Medicare — one of the rare instances where both Donald Trump and Kamala Harris found agreement. Though some Americans see defense industries as key to the revival of domestic manufacturing, military spending is notoriously inefficient, and more of it will do very little to enhance America’s long-term economic competitiveness.

So, it is hardly wise to continue to base U.S. grand strategy on an ever-expanding Pentagon budget. As former Trump National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien wrote earlier this year, “large increases to defense expenditures are unlikely regardless of which party controls the White House and Congress. Spending smarter will have to substitute for spending more.”

Meanwhile, the United States is overextended. In the Middle East, the U.S. military has spent more than \$4.8 billion striking Houthis in Yemen, while U.S. weapons deliveries to Israel have fueled a widening conflict. U.S. military personnel manning Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense systems in Israel could easily be caught in the crossfire. U.S. forces at vulnerable bases in Syria and Iraq have regularly been targeted by Iran-backed militias since the Gaza War began. And, in Ukraine, where the United States has already delivered over \$100 billion in aid, U.S. weapons have failed to tip the scales decisively in Kyiv’s favor.

The trade-offs are obvious: at a time when most strategists call for focusing on the Indo-Pacific, money, materiel, and too much time and attention have been spent elsewhere.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Reject the Primacist Strategy: There is a straightforward path to escape the conundrum of overly ambitious goals not matched to realistic means and effective ways. It begins by rejecting the advice of primacists who insist that the only option available to the United States is to double down on past failures and spend many trillions more on the Pentagon – throwing good money after bad is rarely the answer.

The NDS Commission’s contention that Americans will tolerate higher taxes and cuts to social welfare spending to support ever more for the military is laughable. In the election cycle just concluded, no politician campaigned on such a platform. Indeed, Donald Trump pledged to *cut* taxes and preserve Social Security.

Primacy was not necessarily the right strategy for the United States after the end of the Cold War, and it is particularly ill-suited to today’s world. The United States is one of the world’s greatest nations, but it is *not* indispensable. More to the point, U.S. policies should be focused on advancing U.S. interests. In an increasingly multipolar world, one in which competitiveness is measured in ways that have nothing to do with military prowess, U.S. policy must lean into rebuilding at home and shifting the burden to capable allies in Europe and Asia abroad. For their part, other countries must take responsibility for preserving peace and prosperity in their respective regions. Safeguarding global security is a task that can no longer fall solely on Americans’ shoulders.

Rebuild U.S. Strength with Fiscal Discipline: Rebuilding U.S. strength begins with fiscal discipline. The government must stop spending beyond its means. And policy must be targeted at delivering tangible benefits to the many millions of Americans who believe that the system is rigged against them.

In foreign policy, specifically, U.S. government officials need to prioritize. As Frederick the Great famously said, “He who defends everything defends nothing.” Policymakers should be laser-focused on advancing American security, prosperity, and freedom, and rigorously scrutinize whether a particular foreign challenge merits U.S. intervention, either military or otherwise.

Adopt Criteria for Military Intervention: A simple set of criteria for restraining the U.S. government’s interventionist instincts is essential. Caspar Weinberger suggested such a course following the disastrous bombing of the U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Lebanon in 1982. A decade later, his former senior military aide, Colin Powell, offered a similar set of guidelines to govern military intervention. These included an understanding of the prospects for success or the risks of failure, a clear exit strategy, and an eye to the durability of public support. The 20-year-long War on Terror failed to meet any of Powell’s benchmarks. When the United States attempted to remake broken societies half a world away, the effort was both ineffective and enormously costly.

Some have complained that the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine made it too hard for the United States to deploy forces abroad, but a high threshold for the use of force was precisely the point. Americans who have come to adulthood since the Global War on Terror and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan — Generations Y and Z, respectively — are more inclined to question the rationale for starting new wars than the generations who came before. And, in general, many more Americans of all ages sense that U.S. foreign policy has not been working very well. They seem open to the suggestion that we should try something different.

Craft a New Consensus on Foreign Policy: In the midst of the Second World War, the columnist Walter Lippmann observed, “Foreign policy consists in bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation’s commitments and the nation’s power.” When he wrote that, there was broad and deep consensus behind what the United States was doing overseas, and the vast majority of Americans were willing to sacrifice much to ensure that both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan were defeated.

Today, there is no such national consensus on questions of U.S. foreign policy, or anything else, for that matter. Lippmann would therefore appreciate America’s current predicament. It is up to the present generation of foreign policy thinkers to craft a credible way out.