

U.S. National Security Strategy after Primacy: Resilience, Self-Reliance, and Restraint

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Senator McCain, Senator Reed, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning. It is an honor to be here.

This is a vital undertaking. There is an urgent need for the United States to clarify its national security goals, to craft a strategy that prioritizes those goals, and to consider the tools necessary to achieve them. Our military forces of the future should conform to that strategy.

I will focus first on how U.S. foreign policy has shaped the international system. Second, I will explain the flaws of our current grand strategy, and propose an alternative, with a particular focus on the role that U.S. allies and partners should play in the future. Lastly, I will briefly touch on some of the capabilities that the U.S. military requires to carry out its vital missions.

Understanding U.S. Foreign Policy

U.S. foreign policy is crippled today by a dramatic disconnect between what Americans expect of it and what the nation's leaders are giving them. If U.S. policymakers don't address this gap, they risk pursuing a policy whose ends don't match with the means the American people are willing to provide.

What is our foreign policy? To the extent that it can be summarized in a single word, that word is "primacy": a foreign policy that hinges on a forward-deployed military geared to stopping prospective threats before they materialize. Primacy holds that it would be too dangerous to allow other countries to defend themselves and their interests. Some will botch the job, necessitating costly U.S. intervention later. Others will succeed too well, unleashing arms races that would alter the delicate balance of regional or international relations. Thus, primacy reassures; it discourages other countries from defending themselves and their interests.

For much of the past two decades, these underlying premises of U.S. foreign policy have not changed, although the preferred terms or phrases to describe it have. Other popular variations include "deep engagement," "unipolarity," "liberal hegemony," or the particularly grandiose "benevolent global hegemony."

President Obama favors "leadership." That word appears 35 times in his latest National Security Strategy.

His predecessors have all had similar aspirations, although most managed to work in a few more synonyms. It all boils down to primacy.

For example, at the dawn of the post-Cold War era, officials in the George H.W. Bush administration aspired for the United States to be the sole global power. Now that the nation's long-time rival was gone, the object of U.S. foreign policy, according to an early draft of the Defense Planning Guidance, was to "prevent the re-emergence of a new rival" capable of challenging U.S. power in any vital area, including Western Europe, Asia, or the territory of the former Soviet Union. To accomplish this task, the United States would retain preponderant military power, not merely to deter attacks against the United States, but also to deter "potential competitors" — including long-time U.S. allies such as Germany and Japan — "from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role."¹

Leaving aside, for now, the question of whether the strategy is preventing rivals from challenging U.S. power, the costs have been considerable. Primacy, notes MIT's Barry Posen, "encourages less-friendly states to compete with the United States more intensively, while encouraging friendly states to do less than they should in their own defense, or to be more adventurous than is wise."²

For the most part, American taxpayers, and especially American troops, have borne the burdens of primacy, while U.S. allies have been content to focus on domestic spending, and allow their underfunded defenses to languish. Because U.S. security guarantees to wealthy allies have caused them to under-provide for their own defense, they also have less capacity to deal with common security challenges, from ethnic violence in the Balkans in the late 1990s, to combatting terrorism and piracy in the Middle East, South Asia, or the Horn of Africa in the 2000s, to averting state collapse in North Africa today.

But there is an even more dramatic problem underlying U.S. foreign policy today: it requires U.S. leaders to push, prod, and occasionally even hoodwink Americans into taking on unnecessary tasks. Even strong advocates of primacy concede that it might not be realistic to expect Americans to bear the burdens of global governance indefinitely, and admit to the need for misdirection and subterfuge.

"Americans," Michael Mandelbaum grudgingly admitted in his book, *The Case for Goliath*, "approach the world much as other people do....For the American public, foreign policy, like charity, begins at home." For that reason, above all others, Mandelbaum predicted, "the American role in the world may depend in part on Americans not scrutinizing it too closely."³

It is no longer appropriate to expect Americans to remain ignorant about our foreign policy. Primacy served us well immediately after the end of World War II, when the nations of Europe and East Asia were physically broken and fiscally broke, and we wanted to prevent the reemergence of Japan and Germany as rivals. Protecting our Asian and European allies continued to make sense during the Cold War, as long as our absence from those continents would have left an imbalance of power that the Red Army or Communist China could exploit.

¹ "Excerpts From Pentagon's Plan: 'Prevent the Re-Emergence of a New Rival'," *New York Times*, March 8, 1992.

² Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 24.

³ Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World's Government in the 21st Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), pp. 173, 224.

But we should ask more of our allies and security partners today and in the future. We shouldn't merely expect them to support us when we act militarily abroad. We shouldn't merely demand that they allow us to use our facilities in their lands, often on their behalf. Rather, we should expect them to act first, to address urgent threats to their security, before they become threats to their wider region, or the world.

On the subject of threats, I do not believe that we are living in the most dangerous time in human history, or even in my lifetime. There are dangers in the world; there always have been, and there always will be. We are quite good at identifying a dizzying array of possible threats.⁴ An effective national security strategy will prioritize among them, and identify the best tools to mitigate them.

In that context, the key question is what Americans should be prepared to do to address which threats, and what will be expected of others. Whether you agree with me or not about today's threats as compared to those a generation ago, or a century ago, the best approach would involve many countries who are willing and able to confront potential local or regional challenges.

Under the current model, the United States is expected to address all threats, in all regions, at all times. We need a new grand strategy, one that expects other countries to take primary responsibility for their protecting their security and preserving their interests. We need a resilient international order, one that is not overly dependent on the military power of a single country. We need capable, self-reliant partners. And we must restrain our impulse to use the U.S. military when our vital interests are not directly threatened.

A New Profile of Power

Such a grand strategy, built around a greater skepticism toward military intervention, leads logically toward a new profile of power: namely, a smaller military oriented around defending U.S. security and U.S. interests.

We should not reduce our military without first rethinking how those forces will be used. If a finite number of assets are stretched to the limit to cover excessive global commitments, there is a serious risk that we will damage morale and readiness, thus contributing to a "hollow force" – a military that appears capable on the surface, but that is, in actuality, crippled by inferior equipment, insufficient maintenance, and inadequate training.

We must work over the next decade to renegotiate or abrogate security relationships. Alliances for mutual defense, and to advance common interests, are acceptable; the current inequitable arrangement, whereby we agree to defend our allies, and they agree to let us, is not. It is unreasonable to expect U.S. taxpayers to foot the bill when U.S. interests are not at stake.

Put another way, the days of the U.S. military serving as the world's global constabulary, responding to every 911 call, from every corner of the world, should end.

⁴ See, for example, John Mueller and Christopher Preble, eds., *A Dangerous World? Threat Perception and U.S. National Security* (Cato Institute, 2014).

For the balance of my time, I'm going to focus on three aspects of the force structure consistent with a foreign policy of self reliance and restraint: a capable Navy, a credible nuclear deterrent, and a flexible, mobile Army.

A Focused Navy

I'm proud to have served in the United States Navy. I spent about six months at Navy schools in Newport, Rhode Island, and then three years on the guided missile cruiser USS TICONDEROGA, mostly in Norfolk, Virginia, but also two deployments overseas. I have a great naval name. I grew up in Maine, as did about 10 generations of Prebles before me. They build ships at Bath just across the Kennebec River from where some of my ancestors first settled.

I am a Navy partisan. There is no point in trying to conceal that fact. But my support for a strong and capable Navy reflects more than just parochialism and ancestral pride. And my love of the institution, and the men and women who serve in it, informs my attitudes about the missions that our Navy should be expected to perform, and the ships that it will need to perform them.

The number of ships in the U.S. Navy has declined precipitously since the late-1980s. In those days, we were confronting a globe-straddling Soviet empire with a vast and capable blue-water navy. I remember it well. I was a young midshipman in the Navy ROTC program at George Washington University, and the SecNav back then, John Lehman, famously aspired to build a 600-ship navy.

But times have changed. The Soviet Union is where it belongs: on the ash heap of history. And the ships that we deploy today are vastly more capable than the Cold War-era ships, some of which were considerably older than the sailors who deployed on them. We shouldn't, therefore, focus on numbers of ships in the fleet today, per se, but rather on the mix of vessels, and especially their costs and capabilities to perform key missions.

Those costs include opportunity costs. Choosing to invest a substantial share of the Navy's total shipbuilding budget on just a few Ford-class aircraft carriers necessarily means that we will buy fewer small surface combatants, especially cruisers and destroyers. I also believe that we need a successor to the Oliver Hazard Perry class frigates, the last of which was decommissioned earlier this year. The costly and disappointing littoral combat ships may not be the answer. And where do submarines fit into the mix? The shipbuilding budget must also account for them, both ballistic missile submarines and fast attack boats. Understanding these tradeoffs is crucial. Are we prepared to say that a single platform costing \$14 billion is worth more than six or seven DDGs? Can the United States build a small surface combatant for less than \$500 million? Other countries can, so why can't we?

We should not build our fleet around the supposition that it will be continuously engaged in offensive operations across the planet. Under a strategy of self-reliance and restraint, the U.S. Navy will be a surge force, capable of deploying if local actors prove incapable of addressing threats, not a permanent presence force, committed to preventing bad things from happening, all the time, and everywhere.

Safeguarding the flow of essential commodities and finished goods was a core mission for the U.S. military during the Cold War, when the Soviet Navy aspired to close vital sea lanes of communications (SLOCs), and they appeared to have the ability to do so, at least for a time. Today the situation is far different. Few international actors have an incentive to close major international waterways, and those that are so inclined – e.g pirates, bandits, and various non-state actors – lack the capacity to do so. They can disrupt. They can threaten. They cannot deny the use of these waterways to determined shippers backed by capable nation states.

Sea-lane control in the modern era aims to ensure the free flow of goods and is therefore primarily defensive in nature. Given that the sea-control mission will be shared with other countries, most of whom will be operating in close proximity to their home waters, our force planning can focus on our core obligations, principally in the Western Hemisphere. That mission could be supported by small surface combatants, including destroyers, and possibly a new class of frigates. In the unlikely event that a regional conflict threatened to close a distant strategic choke point, naval and air forces from many different countries would be able to respond, augmented by U.S. forces as necessary.

In this context, we should revisit the decision to build a number of very large and costly aircraft carriers. These vessels are not well suited to the sea control mission, and will become increasingly vulnerable to defensive weapons that force them to operate at greater and greater distances from shore. The investment in such exquisite technology – a single platform that consumes a substantial share of the total shipbuilding budget – raises serious questions about how such platforms will actually be deployed in an era of defensive dominance. Simply put, will any future president of the United States risk losing even a single such vessel? And what interests would justify taking such risks?⁵

A Small but Credible Nuclear Deterrent

Maintaining a credible nuclear deterrent is a key component of U.S. national security policy, but U.S. security does not require nearly 1,600 nuclear weapons deployed on a triad of delivery vehicles—bombers, land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). A smaller nuclear deterrent based entirely on submarines would be sufficient to deter attacks against the United States. It might be more politically feasible to reduce to a dyad of delivery vehicles – SLBMs with either bombers or ICBMs – but that would signal the triumph of parochial interests over the needs of U.S. security.

The triad grew up during the 1950s as a result of competition between the military services. The rationales were thin at the time, and quickly were superseded by dramatic technological improvements that the services chose to downplay. As the competition for resources abated in the 1960s, the Navy and the Air Force stopped denigrating each others' nuclear delivery systems and began arguing on behalf of the triad as an article of faith. It is not clear, in retrospect, that a triad was ever required to deter Soviet attacks against the United States or U.S. allies.

⁵ See, especially, CAPT Henry J. Hendrix, USN (Ret.) “At What Cost a Carrier?” Disruptive Defense Papers, March 2013, Center for a New American Security, http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS%20Carrier_Hendrix_FINAL.pdf.

Maintaining a guaranteed second-strike for deterrence was never the only goal, but today's submarines are also capable of counterforce (i.e. first-strike) missions.

U.S. power today makes the case for the triad even more dubious. Survivability is no longer a feasible justification. No adversary has the capability to destroy all U.S. ballistic submarines, let alone all three types of delivery vehicles, and there would be time to adjust our nuclear force posture if that circumstance changed.

Overinvesting in nuclear weapons and nuclear delivery vehicles, even if such expenditures represent only a small share of the total military budget, nonetheless diverts resources that could be more effectively invested elsewhere. We should build and maintain only what we need.⁶

Flexible Ground Forces Postured for Defense, Not Nation Building

What about our ground forces? Some argue that the Army and Marine Corps are well-suited for counterterrorism missions, because they rely on precision firepower and they are more adept at separating terrorists and terrorist-sympathizers from innocent bystanders.

But the belief that a larger military is necessary, or even effective, at reducing the threat of terrorism is mistaken. Counterterrorism is not an especially personnel-intensive endeavor, and, to the extent that it is, the people most heavily involved are not, and should not be, members of the military.⁷

And what of the supposed need for more troops to conduct Iraq and Afghanistan-style conflicts – regime-change operations followed by years of armed nation building? Some Americans believe that our failings in those countries, especially in Iraq, are a function of having too few “boots on the ground.” From that flows the logical conclusion that we need more people in boots.

The idea that our military is stretched too thin because our commitments exceed our means to achieve them is widespread. The best way to resolve this imbalance, however, is to rethink the ends, as opposed to merely increasing the means.

No one disputes that our troops have been overtaxed by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But the problem of too few troops chasing too many missions predated 9/11. We have asked the members of our military—and especially those men and women in the Army and Marine Corps—to be the lead instrument of our foreign policies ever since the end of the Cold War. Our troops have responded honorably, but they cannot do everything, and they cannot be everywhere.

More troops are not the answer. A more judicious use of the troops that we already have is. Rather than increase the size of the Army and Marine Corps, we should reduce the number of

⁶ See Benjamin H. Friedman, Christopher A. Preble, and Matt Fay “The End of Overkill? Reassessing U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy,” Cato Institute White Paper, September 24, 2013, <http://www.cato.org/publications/white-paper/end-overkill-reassessing-us-nuclear-weapons-policy>.

⁷ For more on this point, see Paul R. Pillar and Christopher A. Preble, “Don’t You Know There’s a War On? Assessing the Military’s Role in Counterterrorism,” in Benjamin H. Friedman, Jim Harper, and Christopher A. Preble, eds., *Terrorizing Ourselves: Why American Counterterrorism Policy Is Failing and How to Fix It* (Cato Institute, 2010).

active-duty personnel in both services, and transition to a smaller force augmented by a capable ready reserve.

We should also pause to consider the wisdom of armed nation building, what the military also calls counterinsurgency (COIN). When the United States chooses to shuffle the political deck in a weak or failing state, it needs men and women on the ground to do the work. Bombs can't build schools or bridges, reform legal codes or root out corruption. They can't convince the locals that we care about them enough to stick around for the long haul and will be there to protect them if the irreconcilables return to exact vengeance.

And that backlash is nearly inevitable; those driven out of power will fight to regain what they lost. FM 3-24, the military's COIN manual, explains "Insurgencies are protracted by nature. Thus, COIN operations always demand considerable expenditures of time and resources."

The United States is ill suited to such missions. This is not the fault of the U.S. military. The American people will support missions to strike our enemies with a vengeance, but solid majorities believe that the nation-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan weren't worth the effort. The widespread opposition to deeper involvement in the Syrian civil war demonstrates that the public's skepticism hasn't abated.

The public's instincts are correct. If you understand the culture, if you avoid counterproductive violence, if you integrate civilians and make reconstruction operations a reward for cooperation, if you train the local forces well, if you pick your allies wisely, if you protect enough civilians and win their loyalty and more, you might succeed. But even avoiding a few of those ifs is too much competence to expect of any political and military leaders. Many of the crucial factors for success are simply beyond the capacity of outside forces to control. That is why insurgencies in the last century generally lasted for decades and why the track record of democratic powers pacifying uprisings in foreign lands is abysmal.⁸

Then again, Americans are accustomed to doing the impossible if the impossible is truly necessary. The ultimate reason why Americans will not master counterinsurgency and state-building is that it is not necessary. The supposed link between terrorism and state failure is weak to nonexistent. Terrorists operate in many perfectly healthy states (including Spain, the U.K. and, most recently, France), while many weak or failing states don't serve as launching pads for violent extremism directed at Americans. We should deal with threats from Yemen or Somalia or Afghanistan as they arise and drop the pretense that we can or must construct a modern nation state in any of those places in order to defeat transnational terrorism.

If we are unlikely to embark on protracted nation-building missions for decades on end, and if the military, particularly our ground forces, are not the best tool for counterterrorism, we should revisit the other possible rationales for a large standing Army. The principal advantage of having that force, 20 to 30 percent of which is forward deployed in foreign bases, is that it is quite easy

⁸ From Benjamin H. Friedman, Harvey M. Sapolsky, and Christopher Preble, "Learning the Right Lessons from Iraq," Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 610, February 13, 2008, <http://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/learning-right-lessons-iraq>. See also Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (New York: Cambridge University, 2003). See also Jeffrey Record, *Beating Goliath: Why Insurgencies Win* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2007).

for it to become involved in foreign wars, without attracting too much attention by the American people, or their representatives here in Congress. The public is rarely engaged to the point of debating why we might be involved in such wars, let alone how to win them. This hardly seems like an advantage at all. If we reduce our permanent overseas presence and encourage other countries to defend themselves, we could rely more heavily on reservists serving stateside. And when there are calls for deploying U.S. forces abroad, and those reserves are mobilized into the active force, we can be sure that that will trigger a national debate.

Let me be clear: this isn't just about saving money; it's about spending money wisely. Ronald Reagan said, "Defense is not a budget issue. You spend what you need." He was right, which is why it is crucial that we understand what we need. The misallocation of funds — whether for platforms the Pentagon doesn't need, or bases it doesn't want or personnel it won't use — takes away from other priorities. We need a balanced force focused on defending vital U.S. interests, not a top-heavy force geared to fight the last decade's wars or to defend others who can and should defend themselves.

Conclusion: Rethinking Ends and Means

In the debate over military spending that is now raging, it is generally assumed that our foreign policy, and thus the roles and missions that we assign to our military, will remain unchanged — or at least will not become less onerous. It is unreasonable to expect our military to do the same, or more, with less. It is unfair to the troops and their families. This noble sentiment explains the current push to increase the Pentagon's budget above the spending caps imposed by the bipartisan Budget Control Act of 2011. Many people believe that the only way to address the means/end mismatch is to remove the fiscal constraints.

But the military's roles and missions are not handed down from heaven. They are not carved on stone tablets. They are a function of the nation's grand strategy and informed by the dominant intellectual paradigms at a given point in time.

That strategy must take account of the resources that can be made available to execute it. Under primacy, in the current domestic political context, increasing the means entails telling the American people to accept cuts in popular domestic programs, higher taxes, or both, so that our allies can maintain their bloated domestic spending and neglect their defenses.

It seems unlikely that Americans will embrace such an approach. "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 U.S. foreign policy.⁹ The best recourse, therefore, is to reconsider our 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.

⁹ Dina Smeltz, Ivo Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, and Craig Kafura, "America Divided: Political Partisanship and U.S. Foreign Policy," Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2015, Appendix Figure 2, p. 45.