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## AMERICAN PRIMACY

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### Its Prospects and Pitfalls

*Stephen M. Walt*

**T**he end of the Cold War left the United States in a position of power unseen since the Roman Empire. The U.S. economy produces about 25 percent of the world's goods and services; it is more than twice as big as that of Japan, the world's number-two economic power. The United States spends more on defense than the next nine countries combined, and because seven of those nine countries are its close allies, the effective advantage is even larger. The United States is the world leader in higher education and information technology, and its cultural shadow—in music, cinema, television, and other arts—is enormous.

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America's position in the world is not perfect, perhaps, but Americans could hardly ask for much more.<sup>1</sup>

This position of primacy is partly due to good fortune and especially to having been founded on a continent rich in resources yet far from other major powers. But the United States is also number one because its leaders have deliberately sought to achieve and maintain that position. During the nineteenth century the United States gradually expanded to become a continental power, encouraged immigration and foreign investment, and sought to exclude other major powers from the Western Hemisphere. As the Monroe Doctrine and the concept of Manifest Destiny symbolized, the guiding star of U.S. foreign policy was the goal of making the nation a hegemon in its own neighborhood.<sup>2</sup>

After becoming a great power at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the United States also

sought to prevent other states from establishing similar positions of hegemony in their own regions. The logic of this policy was straightforward—so long as neither Europe nor Asia was dominated by a single power, states in both regions would be obliged to worry primarily about each other and would be unable to focus their attention on the United States. Thus, the United States intervened in Europe in World Wars I and II in order to prevent Germany from establishing hegemony there and fought in the Pacific theater to prevent Japan from dominating that region as well. During the Cold War, of course, the United States explicitly sought to remain the world's strongest power in both the military and economic realms. As the State Department's Policy Planning Staff argued in 1947, "To seek less than preponderant power would be to opt for defeat. Preponderant power must be the object of U.S. policy."<sup>3</sup>

Given this long-standing ambition, it is ironic that the U.S. victory in the Cold War and the growing awareness of its remarkable global position has produced a debate on the desirability of primacy and on its implications for American foreign policy. For some writers, such as Robert Jervis, the value of "primacy" is diminished in an era where nuclear weapons limit the ability of great powers to threaten each other and when relations among the major powers are regulated by norms, institutions, and a spirit of democratic compromise.<sup>4</sup> For others, such as Samuel P. Huntington, primacy remains an invaluable resource, and preserving it "is central to the welfare and security of America and the future of freedom."<sup>5</sup> American military planners continue to craft policies designed to sustain a considerable advantage, and one would be hard pressed to find a prominent U.S. politician who would openly endorse anything less than the continuation of the nation's dominance. If the United States is now a "hyperpower," to use French foreign minister Hubert Verdrine's evocative term, its present policy seems designed to maintain that position as long as possible. Given that the United States cannot alter its current position—at least not in the short term—we need to understand both the positive ends that primacy can offer and the pitfalls that it may present.

Accordingly, the first part of this article outlines the main benefits that U.S. primacy now brings. I argue that primacy increases the nation's security, fosters a more stable and prosperous world, and gives the United States far more influence over global events than any other state possesses. Given these features, it is hardly surprising that there is a strong bipartisan consensus for maintaining America's privileged position. The second part of this article examines some of the ways that primacy complicates the making of U.S. foreign policy. Being number one is an enviable thing, but it also creates special challenges that are often overlooked or misunderstood. The conclusion describes how the United

States can best use its power to advance specific foreign policy goals and avoid some of the pitfalls of its present position.

### **WHAT IS PRIMACY GOOD FOR?**

The first thing to understand about U.S. primacy is that it is not new. Although the end of the Cold War highlighted America's unprecedented concentration of economic and military power, the United States has had the world's largest economy for over a hundred years and the greatest military potential for most of that time as well.<sup>6</sup> Despite alarmist concerns about the Soviet military during the Cold War, U.S. strength exceeded that of the Soviet Union for most (if not all) of that period. Soviet military capabilities were a match for American forces only in Europe, and the capacity of the USSR to project power globally was always distinctly inferior to the naval, air, and amphibious capabilities of the United States.

Americans, in short, are used to being number one. Those who believe that primacy does not really matter fail to appreciate how accustomed Americans are to having it; they might miss it, as they would oxygen, if it were gone. Why? Because primacy provides at least four major benefits.

#### ***Primacy Provides Security***

Perhaps the most obvious reason why states seek primacy—and why the United States benefits from its current position—is that international politics is a dangerous business. Being wealthier and stronger than other states does not guarantee that a state will survive, of course, and it cannot insulate a state from all outside pressures. But the strongest state is more likely to escape serious harm than weaker ones are, and it will be better equipped to resist the pressures that arise. Because the United States is so powerful, and because its society is so wealthy, it has ample resources to devote to whatever problems it may face in the future.

At the beginning of the Cold War, for example, its power enabled the United States to help rebuild Europe and Japan, to assist them in developing stable democratic orders, and to subsidize the emergence of an open international economic order.<sup>7</sup> The United States was also able to deploy powerful armed forces in Europe and Asia as effective deterrents to Soviet expansion. When the strategic importance of the Persian Gulf increased in the late 1970s, the United States created its Rapid Deployment Force in order to deter threats to the West's oil supplies; in 1990–91 it used these capabilities to liberate Kuwait. Also, when the United States was attacked by the Al-Qaeda terrorist network in September 2001, it had the wherewithal to oust the network's Taliban hosts and to compel broad international support for its campaign to eradicate Al-Qaeda itself. It

would have been much harder to do any of these things if the United States had been weaker.

Today, U.S. primacy helps deter potential challenges to American interests in virtually every part of the world. Few countries or nonstate groups want to invite the “focused enmity” of the United States (to use William Wohlforth’s apt phrase), and countries and groups that have done so (such as Libya, Iraq, Serbia, or the Taliban) have paid a considerable price. As discussed below, U.S. dominance does provoke opposition in a number of places, but anti-American elements are forced to rely on covert or indirect strategies (such as terrorist bombings) that do not seriously threaten America’s dominant position. Were American power to decline significantly, however, groups opposed to U.S. interests would probably be emboldened and overt challenges would be more likely.

This does not mean that the United States can act with impunity, nor does it guarantee that the United States will achieve every one of its major foreign policy objectives. It does mean that the United States has a margin of security that weaker states do not possess. This margin of safety is a luxury, perhaps, but it is also a luxury that few Americans would want to live without.

### *Primacy Provides Tranquility*

A second consequence of U.S. primacy is a decreased danger of great-power rivalry and a higher level of overall international tranquility. Ironically, those who argue that primacy is no longer important, because the danger of war is slight, overlook the fact that the extent of American primacy is one of the main reasons why the risk of great-power war is as low as it is.

For most of the past four centuries, relations among the major powers have been intensely competitive, often punctuated by major wars and occasionally by all-out struggles for hegemony. In the first half of the twentieth century, for example, great-power wars killed over eighty million people. Today, however, the dominant position of the United States places significant limits on the possibility of great-power competition, for at least two reasons.

One reason is that because the United States is currently so far ahead, other major powers are not inclined to challenge its dominant position. Not only is there no possibility of a “hegemonic war” (because there is no potential hegemon to mount a challenge), but the risk of war via miscalculation is reduced by the overwhelming gap between the United States and the other major powers. Miscalculation is more likely to lead to war when the balance of power is fairly even, because in this situation both sides can convince themselves that they might be able to win. When the balance of power is heavily skewed, however, the leading state does not need to go to war and weaker states dare not try.<sup>8</sup>

The second reason is that the continued deployment of roughly two hundred thousand troops in Europe and in Asia provides a further barrier to conflict in

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each region. So long as U.S. troops are committed abroad, regional powers know that launching a war is likely to lead to a confrontation with the United States. Thus, states within these regions do not

worry as much about each other, because the U.S. presence effectively prevents regional conflicts from breaking out. What Joseph Joffe has termed the “American pacifier” is not the only barrier to conflict in Europe and Asia, but it is an important one. This tranquilizing effect is not lost on America’s allies in Europe and Asia. They resent U.S. dominance and dislike playing host to American troops, but they also do not want “Uncle Sam” to leave.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, U.S. primacy is of benefit to the United States, and to other countries as well, because it dampens the overall level of international insecurity. World politics might be more interesting if the United States were weaker and if other states were forced to compete with each other more actively, but a more exciting world is not necessarily a better one. A comparatively boring era may provide few opportunities for genuine heroism, but it is probably a good deal more pleasant to live in than “interesting” decades like the 1930s or 1940s.

#### ***Primacy Fosters Prosperity***

By facilitating the development of a more open and liberal world economy, American primacy also fosters global prosperity. Economic interdependence is often said to be a cause of world peace, but it is more accurate to say that peace encourages interdependence—by making it easier for states to accept the potential vulnerabilities of extensive international intercourse.<sup>10</sup> Investors are more willing to send money abroad when the danger of war is remote, and states worry less about being dependent on others when they are not concerned that these connections might be severed. When states are relatively secure, they will also be less fixated on how the gains from cooperation are distributed. In particular, they are less likely to worry that extensive cooperation will benefit others more and thereby place them at a relative disadvantage over time.<sup>11</sup>

By providing a tranquil international environment, in short, U.S. primacy has created political conditions that are conducive to expanding global trade and investment. Indeed, American primacy was a prerequisite for the creation and gradual expansion of the European Union, which is often touted as a triumph of economic self-interest over historical rivalries. Because the United States was there to protect the Europeans from the Soviet Union *and* from each other, they

could safely ignore the balance of power within Western Europe and concentrate on expanding their overall level of economic integration. The expansion of world trade has been a major source of increased global prosperity, and U.S. primacy is one of the central pillars upon which that system rests.<sup>12</sup> The United States also played a leading role in establishing the various institutions that regulate and manage the world economy. As a number of commentators have noted, the current era of “globalization” is itself partly an artifact of American power. As Thomas Friedman puts it, “Without America on duty, there will be no America Online.”<sup>13</sup>

### *Primacy Maximizes Influence*

Finally, primacy gives the United States greater freedom of action and greater influence over the entire agenda of global issues. Because it is less dependent on other countries, the United States is to a large extent able to set the terms for its participation in many international arrangements. Although cooperating with others is often in its interest, the option to “go it alone” gives the United States greater bargaining power than most (if not all) other states.<sup>14</sup> The United States can also choose to stay out of trouble if it wishes; because it is objectively very secure, it can remain aloof from many of the world’s problems even when it might be able to play a constructive role.<sup>15</sup>

Yet primacy also means that the United States can undertake tasks that no other state would even contemplate and can do so with reasonable hope of success. In the past decade, for instance, the United States played a key role in guiding the reunification of Germany; negotiated a deal to end North Korea’s nuclear weapons program; and convinced Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus to give up the nuclear arsenals they had inherited from the Soviet Union. It also rescued the Mexican economy during the peso crisis in 1994, brought three new members into the Nato alliance, defeated and defanged Iraq in 1991, and kept the Iraqi regime under tight constraints thereafter. The United States also played an important role in the recovery from the Asian financial crisis of 1997, led the coalition that defeated Serbia in the 1999 war in Kosovo, and used its economic power to encourage the ouster of Slobodan Milosevic and his prosecution for alleged war crimes. U.S. power probably helped prevent any number of events that might have occurred but at this writing have not—such as a direct Chinese challenge to Taiwan or a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan. Each of these achievements required resources, and America’s capacity to shape world events would be much smaller were its relative power to decline.

In short, saying that Americans like a position of primacy is akin to saying that they like power, and they prefer to have more of it rather than less. It may not be politically correct to talk about “enjoying” the exercise of power, but most

people understand that it is better to have it than to lack it. Having a great deal of power may not guarantee success or safety, but it certainly improves the odds. One imagines, for example, that Senator Tom Daschle likes being *majority* leader of the U.S. Senate more than he liked being minority leader, just as one suspects that Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and now Vladimir Putin would have acted quite differently had Russian (or Soviet) power not deteriorated so dramatically. The reason is simple—when one is stronger, one can defend one's interests more effectively and can more easily prevent others from imposing their will.<sup>16</sup> Power also gives people (or states) the capacity to pursue positive ends, and a position of primacy maximizes one's ability to do so.

Thus, anyone who thinks that the United States should try to discourage the spread of weapons of mass destruction, promote human rights, advance the cause of democracy, or pursue any other positive political goal should recognize that the nation's ability to do so rests primarily upon its power. The United States would accomplish far less if it were weaker, and it would discover that other states were setting the agenda of world politics if its own power were to decline. As Harry Truman put it over fifty years ago, "Peace must be built upon power, as well as upon good will and good deeds."<sup>17</sup>

The bottom line is clear. Even in a world with nuclear weapons, extensive economic ties, rapid communications, an increasingly vocal chorus of nongovernmental organizations, and other such novel features, power still matters, and primacy is still preferable. People running for president do not declare that their main goal as commander in chief would be to move the United States into the number-two position. They understand, as do most Americans, that being number one is a luxury they should try very hard to keep.

### WHY BEING NUMBER ONE IS HARDER THAN IT LOOKS

Being number one is desirable, then, but it is not an unalloyed good for the incumbent. America's current position of preponderance also creates a number of significant problems for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy, problems that make it harder to use American power and more difficult to obtain the precise outcomes that the nation seeks.<sup>18</sup> What are these pitfalls, and how do they affect the ability of the United States to get what it wants?

#### *Declining Public Support*

The first problem created by America's favorable global position is a loss of public support for an active and engaged foreign policy. When asked, Americans still favor "engagement" over "isolationism," but public interest in foreign issues is declining, and support for a *costly* foreign policy is especially weak. In a 1998 poll by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, for example, when Americans



were asked to name two or three important problems facing the nation, foreign policy issues did not make the top seven; they constituted only 7.3 percent of all issues mentioned. When asked to name “two or three *foreign policy* problems facing the nation,” the most common response (at 20 percent) was “Don’t

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know.” Support for traditional U.S. allies has also declined significantly.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the United States withdrew from Somalia after eighteen soldiers were lost, stayed out of Rwanda completely, was visibly reluctant to send ground

troops to Bosnia or Kosovo, and fought the air war in Kosovo from fifteen thousand feet. Public support for key international institutions has also declined, and foreign policy issues played at most a minor role in the 2000 presidential campaign. It is also worth noting that a key element of President George W. Bush’s campaign platform was the need for the United States to be more “selective” in its overseas commitments. This is a far cry from the call to “pay any price and bear any burden” that animated U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War.

To be sure, there has been a surge of public interest and support in the wake of the 11 September terrorist attacks and the subsequent war against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Yet even here, the United States has relied heavily on proxy forces and remains ambivalent about taking on a long-term security role in Central Asia. Unless Al-Qaeda proves more resilient than it now appears, public attention is certain to wane over time. As it does, U.S. leaders will once again find themselves having to weigh their international ambitions against a rather modest level of popular interest and backing.

These shifts are not simply a function of partisan politics or of former president William Clinton’s delicate relationship with the U.S. military. Rather, they are a direct consequence of America’s remarkably favorable world position. Because America is in such good shape, most Americans tend to ignore international politics and to focus their attention on other problems. The point is not that Americans are unwilling to run risks or bear costs; it is that they are reluctant to do so for the kinds of interests that are now at stake. This tendency will discourage any U.S. president from pursuing an activist foreign policy, because public support for it will be thin. Paradoxically, the very strength of America’s present position reduces public support for using that power in costly or risky ways, except in those (one hopes rare) moments when the United States is attacked directly. Indeed, this policy may even make sense—when the world is already one’s oyster, there is not much more to gain.<sup>20</sup>

### *Hubris Can Hurt*

A second pitfall is the opposite of the first—when a nation is as strong as the United States, there is a tendency for its leaders to assume that they can do almost anything. Public support for an ambitious foreign policy may be thin, but U.S. leaders may ignore that fact if they believe they can accomplish a great deal at a relatively low cost. They may also find it difficult to avoid being dragged into various quagmires and responsibilities in many parts of the world, because America's present margin of superiority makes it harder to draw the line against further commitments. As the late Senator Richard Russell once warned, "If America has the capacity to go anywhere and do anything, we will always be going somewhere and doing something."

Consider the past decade. In addition to the various achievements discussed above, the United States tried to broker a final Arab-Israeli peace settlement, re-create a stable multiethnic democracy in Bosnia in the wake of a bloody civil war, and stabilize the entire Balkan region in the aftermath of the war in Kosovo. The United States also provided logistic support for peacekeeping efforts in East Timor, Cambodia, and Sierra Leone; attempted to cement Western influence in the Black Sea and Caspian regions; and tried to get India and Pakistan to refrain from testing nuclear weapons. At the same time, it also committed itself to building a national missile defense system in the face of foreign opposition and enormous technical obstacles. American leaders have also worked to liberalize the world economy, establish a constructive relationship with a rising China, and achieve a workable agreement to combat global warming.

Now consider what the campaign against terrorism has added to America's overloaded foreign policy agenda. To support its military operations in Afghanistan (and possibly elsewhere), the United States has taken on new security obligations in Pakistan and Uzbekistan. To keep the coalition together and rebuild relations with the Arab world, the United States is trying to convince Israel and the Palestinians to make additional concessions after more than a year of bloody violence. To stabilize the Pervez Musharraf government and encourage it to sever its ties to Islamic extremists, Washington is providing economic aid to Pakistan and trying to reduce tensions between Pakistan and India. Having toppled the Taliban, the United States must now take on the challenge of nation building in an impoverished region where it has little background or experience. To ensure that Al-Qaeda does not reemerge somewhere else, the United States is trying to root out terrorist cells in a host of other countries and attempting to cut off the covert financial flows that nurture these networks. To accomplish any one of these goals will be difficult; to achieve the entire agenda will be nearly impossible.

Given these ambitions, it is hardly surprising that the United States does not accomplish everything it tries to do. The real lesson, however, is that strong states are invariably tempted to take on extremely ambitious goals—and they often find this temptation impossible to resist. In baseball, a batter who “swings for the fences” may hit more home runs than others but will probably strike out more often, too. Weaker states cannot accomplish as much as strong ones, but they may be better at recognizing the limits of what they can realistically hope to achieve and be less likely to overextend themselves.

There is an obvious tension between the first two pitfalls, but not a complete contradiction. On the one hand, the fact that foreign policy simply is not very important to most Americans (because the United States is already in very good shape) reduces public support for ambitious foreign policies. On the other hand, fifty years of international activism and America’s extraordinary capabilities can lead its leaders to believe that they can achieve almost anything at an acceptable cost. The danger, of course, is that Washington will establish commitments and pursue goals for which there is little domestic support, only to be blindsided by public opposition should the costs exceed the low initial expectations.

#### *Asymmetry of Motivation*

If the United States is so powerful, why doesn’t it always get what it wants? The reason is simple—although the United States is much stronger than most other countries, other states often care more about the issues at stake than America does. American leaders worry about the spread of nuclear weapons in South Asia, for example, but their Indian and Pakistani counterparts care more about acquiring a deterrent than the Americans care about stopping them. Similarly, the United States and its Nato allies were vastly stronger than Milosevic’s Serbia, but he resisted their pressure for nearly a decade, because his regime cared more about the issues at stake than they did. The same dynamic limits U.S. influence in the Middle East; although the United States would like to foster a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians, its influence is limited, because the antagonists care more about the final outcome than it does.

Once again, the fact that other states are usually more motivated than the United States with respect to their own regional issues does not reflect some failure of strategic vision, lack of leadership, or loss of will on the part of the United States. Rather, this is a direct result of its favorable international position. Other states care more about many issues because their fates are more intimately tied to the results. Conflict in the Middle East does affect the United States, but American survival is hardly at stake in the same way that it is for the Israelis, the Palestinians, or their neighbors. If one of the great benefits of primacy is that it

allows the United States to view many international issues in a detached fashion, that relative disinterest means that weaker states may be willing to pay a large price to thwart U.S. objectives.

***“It’s Lonely at the Top”***

A fourth pitfall follows from the familiar principle of the balance of power. In a world of independent states, the most powerful country will always appear at least somewhat threatening to others, who cannot be entirely sure it will use its power wisely and well. As a result, other states usually try to find ways to keep the power of the dominant state in check, often through formal or informal alliances. This tendency will be muted if the strongest state acts in a benevolent fashion and its goals are broadly compatible with the interests of other major powers, but it never vanishes entirely.<sup>21</sup>

The tendency for states to “balance” the strongest power explains why France, Russia, and China joined forces to undercut U.S. policy toward Iraq and Serbia, and it underlies the principal motivation for the recent Sino-Russian Friendship Treaty.<sup>22</sup> It also explains why European states want to strengthen and deepen the

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European Union, why President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela advocates global resistance to U.S. hegemony, and why President Putin of Russia has expressed hope that India will become a great power

and help re-create a “multipolar world.”<sup>23</sup> The desire to check U.S. influence is also evident in the recent vote ousting the United States from the United Nations Committee on Human Rights, as well as the hostile demonstrations that routinely accompany “Group of Eight” economic summits.

Efforts to balance the United States have been modest thus far (surprisingly so, when one considers how powerful the United States is), because the United States is geographically isolated from the other major power centers and does not seek to dominate any of those regions. Indeed, America’s geographic position remains an enormous asset, because the major powers in Europe and Asia tend to worry more about their neighbors. But the desire to keep a leash on “Uncle Sam” is real, and U.S. leaders should not underestimate the potential for concerted anti-American action in the future.<sup>24</sup>

The tendency for the strongest power to provoke widespread opposition is probably the central challenge of contemporary U.S. foreign policy. The question is, how can the United States minimize the efforts of other states to keep it in check? U.S. policy cannot eliminate that tendency entirely, but it can almost certainly make the problem worse if it is insensitive to others’ concerns.

### ***Conflicting Priorities***

American primacy creates one final pitfall. As the only global superpower, the United States is engaged in virtually every corner of the globe and in almost every significant issue. Even when it tries to remain aloof—as it did in the Balkans in the 1990s and in the Middle East in the first half of 2001—long-standing commitments tend to drag it in. This condition also forces U.S. leaders to make important decisions on issues where they have little background or expertise. One need only reflect on American policy in the Balkans to realize how easy it is for the United States to become engaged in areas and disputes in which it has little experience or insight. By contrast, weaker states can focus their attention on a few key issues and ignore most of the others.

To make matters worse, U.S. objectives in one region or on some particular issue often conflict with its purposes elsewhere, which means that success in one endeavor may make things worse somewhere else. For example, expanding Nato may help defuse tensions in Europe and promote democratic development there, but it inevitably undermines relations with Russia and complicates decision making within the alliance itself. Similarly, the United States wants to support Israel, wants to promote peace in the Middle East, and wants good relations throughout the Arab world; these are all worthy goals, but they are difficult to achieve simultaneously. This same problem is even more acute in the American relationship with China. The United States wants to promote a close economic relationship with China (both for strictly economic reasons and to encourage Chinese moderation), but it also wants to deter China from using force against Taiwan and to encourage Beijing to adopt more liberal human rights policies. Moreover, Washington wants to pursue these goals without alarming its other Asian allies, and to encourage democratic forces in China without destabilizing the Chinese government. The problem, of course, is that pushing hard for any of these objectives will inevitably make it more difficult to achieve others.

Once again, this conundrum is directly related to America's position of primacy. All states face trade-offs in the conduct of foreign policy, but the choices are more numerous and more complicated for the United States, because it has its fingers in many different problems. Lesser powers generally face fewer conflicts between different objectives, simply because they are not committed in as many places and are not trying to accomplish as much.

Taken together, these pitfalls explain why even a country as powerful as the United States cannot achieve all of its foreign policy objectives. They also identify some of the obstacles that U.S. leaders must overcome when engaging with other countries. Thus the final question to consider is how the United States can best exploit its remarkable advantages and minimize the constraints that its preponderant position necessarily imposes.

## HOW TO CONDUCT A “HUMBLE” FOREIGN POLICY

In the second debate of the 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush declared that other states would be attracted to the United States if it were strong but “humble”; they would be repulsed, he warned, if the nation were to use its power in an “arrogant” fashion. His instincts were correct, although his subsequent behavior as president suggests he has not fully embraced his own advice.

The problem is simple. Because the United States is so strong and its influence is so pervasive, it inevitably provokes suspicion by other states and finds it more difficult to gain their cooperation. As discussed above, it also tends to face awkward trade-offs in conducting foreign policy, and often its leaders can expect only thin support for major initiatives. Given such constraints, how can the United States maximize the advantages that primacy provides and avoid its pitfalls? The analysis thus far points to several recommendations.

### *Maintain U.S. Capabilities*

U.S. power is the main source of American international influence and the ultimate guarantor of the nation’s sovereignty. It is the main reason why the support of the United States is valued and why its opposition is feared. Increasing the U.S. lead still further might not be worth the effort (given that the United States is already far ahead), but allowing others to catch up would squander most of the advantages that primacy now provides.

This means that the United States should continue to worry about the overall distribution of world power. In addition to devoting an adequate share of national wealth to the creation of politically meaningful capabilities (including military power, technological expertise, etc.), Washington must project how global trends will affect the nation’s position over time. In particular, U.S. leaders will eventually have to decide whether it makes sense to try to slow the growth of certain powers and take steps to discourage the formation of even tacit anti-American coalitions. In particular, encouraging the emergence of a strong and wealthy China may not be in America’s long-term interest, even if China were eventually to become more democratic.

### *Mailed Fist, Velvet Glove*

U.S. preponderance makes other states more sensitive to the ways in which American power is used. As a result, the United States should take care to use its power judiciously, especially where military force is involved.

From this general point, two specific recommendations follow. The United States should use force with forbearance. Although it will occasionally be tempting to use force preemptively so as to minimize casualties or convey resolve, America’s preponderance allows it to take a more relaxed and deliberate view of many international developments. States whose existence might be endangered

should they fail to act quickly have to be ready to preempt threats and may be forced to respond vigorously to ambiguous warnings. Because the United States is objectively so secure, however, it can rely primarily on policies of deterrence and retaliation rather than preemption. For example, although American officials did have genuine grounds for launching cruise-missile strikes on Afghanistan and Sudan in 1998, the decision to do so on the basis of the inconclusive information then available ignored the larger geopolitical effects of appearing overeager to use force.<sup>25</sup> In general, Washington should follow a prescription of Woodrow Wilson—that the United States “can afford to exercise the self-restraint of a truly great nation, which realizes its own strength and scorns to misuse it.”<sup>26</sup>

Second, the United States can reduce the threat perceived by other states in its overawing power by giving them a degree of influence over the circumstances in which it will use force. Confining the use of force to multilateral contexts would be an effective way to assuage potential fears about unilateral exercise of American power. This point has been lost on conservative opponents of the United Nations and other international institutions, who fail to recognize that multilateral institutions help the United States exercise its power in a way that is less threatening (and therefore more acceptable) to other states. Although exceptions will arise from time to time, the United States should for the most part rely upon a “buddy system” to regulate the large-scale use of its military power. Specifically, if it cannot persuade one or more other major powers to join in, it should refrain from using force.<sup>27</sup> This policy might also increase other states’ incentives to maintain good relations with Washington, because close ties with the United States will give them a greater influence over how Washington chooses to use its power.

It might be asked, does not the recent war in Afghanistan teach the opposite lesson—that other states will respect U.S. power and rush to support the United States provided it acts firmly and makes clear that other states have a clear choice, either to be “with us or against us”? From this perspective, the United States should rarely, if ever, allow allies to interfere with its decision making and should for the most part chart its own course, confident that weaker states will fall into line.

Such a view is obviously appealing to Americans—because it suggests they can do pretty much what they please—and there is probably a grain of truth to it. But it would be a mistake to interpret the degree of international support that the U.S. received after 11 September as evidence that the United States can use force whenever it wants to without jeopardizing its international position. First, the United States enjoyed enormous international sympathy after 11 September because it was responding to an unprovoked attack on innocent civilians. If the United States

came to be seen as the aggressor rather than the victim, however, international support would evaporate quickly. Second, other states have supported the war on terrorism either because they see it as a common danger that threatens all states or because they want to seize this opportunity to advance interests of their own. Third, it remains to be seen how long this high level of international support will last. The United States led an equally impressive coalition in the 1990–91 Persian Gulf War, but allied support faded once Kuwait was liberated; the loss of backing eventually doomed U.S. efforts to enforce the UN sanctions regime.

The central lesson underlying these suggestions is that the United States needs to think of “reassurance” as a continuous policy problem. Throughout the Cold War, the United States did a variety of things to remind its allies that its commitment to them remained solid—military exercises, visits by important officials, oral pledges, and other signals of commitment—and it did them constantly. Now that the Cold War is over and the United States is essentially unchecked, its leaders have to make a similar effort to convince other states of its good will, good judgment, and sense of restraint. American leaders cannot simply declare those values once and then act as they please; reassuring gestures have to be repeated, and reassuring statements have to be reiterated frequently. The more consistent the nation’s words and deeds, the more effective such pledges will be.

#### ***Do Not Treat Potential Adversaries as Monolithic***

During the Cold War, the United States sometimes viewed all leftist or Marxist regimes as indistinguishable parts of a communist “monolith.” Although some U.S. officials held more subtle views (and developed strategies that reflected them), the general tendency to regard any leftist or socialist regime as a potential tool of the Kremlin often led to self-fulfilling spirals of hostility with these regimes.<sup>28</sup>

Because the United States has an important interest in discouraging other states from joining forces against it, it should not assume that its various opponents are part of some well-organized anti-American movement. To take the most obvious example, referring to North Korea, Iraq, Iran, and Libya collectively as anti-American “rogue states” ignores the important differences between these states, blinds the nation to the possibility of improving relations with some of them, and encourages them to cooperate with one another even more.<sup>29</sup> Even worse, to label Iraq, Iran, and North Korea an “axis of evil,” as President Bush did in his February 2002 State of the Union speech, made it less likely that these regimes would moderate their anti-U.S. policies; it also made key allies question America’s judgment. Similarly, if U.S. leaders assume that cultural differences will lead to an inevitable “clash of civilizations” between the West and various non-Western states, they are likely to act in ways that will aggravate



these differences, thereby making the prophecy self-fulfilling. Equally important, they are more likely to miss opportunities to keep potentially hostile blocs divided. As it is, there are significant obstacles to the formation of a strong anti-American coalition; does the United States really want to encourage one?<sup>30</sup>

***Rethink the Commitment to National Missile Defense***

Despite widespread international misgivings, the Bush administration remains strongly committed to developing missile defenses. In particular, it has announced its intention to withdraw from the 1972 ABM treaty and is accelerating efforts to develop and deploy several forms of missile defense.

Although the Bush administration is unlikely to reverse course at this stage, it would do well to slow down and rethink the merits of rapid development, let alone deployment. Nuclear weapons are still the “trump cards” of international politics, and the acquisition of a genuine “first-strike” capability could give its

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*American primacy is partly due to good fortune, but the United States is also number one because its leaders have deliberately sought to achieve and maintain that position.*

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possessor an extraordinary capacity to coerce or destroy other powers. The combination of large offensive nuclear forces and an effective missile defense could give the United States the capacity to

strike other states with impunity. At the very least, it would make it more difficult for them to deter U.S. conventional actions by threatening to escalate. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Russia, China, and several American allies view this initiative with misgivings. It does little good to try to assure them that the system will be limited to a defense against accidental launches or “rogue states” because they cannot be sure that the United States would not try to expand it later.<sup>31</sup> For all these reasons, other states are likely to regard a U.S. effort to build even a “limited” national missile defense system with alarm. Although such a policy is unlikely to trigger an anti-U.S. alliance all by itself, it would certainly make such a development more likely.

Perhaps most importantly, supporters of national missile defense have yet to advance a compelling strategic rationale for such a radical departure. The most plausible justification for developing national missile defense is the desire to ensure that weaker states (such as Iraq) are not able to negate U.S. conventional military superiority by threatening to use a weapon of mass destruction. A small missile-defense system might be sufficient for this purpose, because these states are unlikely to acquire large arsenals. This means that the United States should be able to negotiate an agreement that permits a limited deployment (sufficient to protect against accidental launches or very small arsenals) while ensuring that Russia, China, and other nuclear powers remain confident that their own deterrents

are not at risk. If the United States wants to reduce other states' incentives to balance against it, it should move slowly on missile defense and remain open to a mutually agreeable bargain on the size of both offensive and defensive strategic forces.

***Defend the Legitimacy of U.S. Primacy***

Other states will be more likely to support American initiatives (and less likely to join forces to thwart them) if they believe American primacy is broadly beneficial. If they think that U.S. power serves the interests of others as well as its own, they may occasionally grumble but will not take active measures to weaken the United States or to hinder its efforts. By contrast, if they think that the United States is insensitive, overweening, selfish, or simply misguided, then it will make sense for them to do less to help the United States and to look for ways to limit U.S. power and defeat American initiatives.

Unfortunately, there is considerable evidence to suggest that foreign elites do not see the U.S. role in the world as favorably as most Americans do. According to one recent survey, for example, only 18 percent of Americans thought that the 11 September attacks were caused by U.S. policies, but 58 percent of the foreigners polled did. Similarly, 52 percent of all Americans believe that foreigners like the United States because "it does a lot of good," but only 21 percent of the foreigners polled share this view.<sup>32</sup> Chinese officials habitually warn about the dangers of U.S. "hegemonism"; countries like Iraq seek to portray the United States as a heartless great power that is indifferent to the sufferings of others; and even long-standing U.S. allies worry about the concentration of power in U.S. hands and the unilateralist tendencies that it fosters.<sup>33</sup>

This means that the United States has a strong incentive for genuine multilateral engagement, largely to convince others that it is not a selfish power bent on exploiting its strength solely for its own benefit. From this perspective, the Bush administration's undiplomatic rejection of the Kyoto Protocol, of the verification protocol for the biological weapons convention, of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, of the international convention on land mines, and of the International Criminal Court were all steps in the wrong direction. Whatever the substantive merits of these various agreements, the United States pays a political price in consistently standing apart from the prevailing global consensus. Unless it is willing to abdicate an active leadership role in world affairs, the Bush team is going to have to convince other states it is willing to compromise and to cooperate on some important issues even when it does not get everything it wants. At the very least, U.S. leaders must go beyond the mere appearance of listening and demonstrate a genuine commitment to give-and-take with its principal allies. Failure to do so will underscore the latent belief that the United States is a

“rogue superpower” that does not deserve the mantle of global leadership, making it more difficult to rally international support for initiatives that Washington wants to pursue.<sup>34</sup>

Does this really matter? According to some commentators, the United States does not need to compromise with others, either because it is strong enough to “go it alone” or because it can always compel their cooperation if it has to. It might be pleasant for the United States if the world worked this way, but it doesn’t. The United States needed help from other countries to go after Al-Qaeda and the Taliban (and the job is not yet finished); it needs support from other states to manage the world economy; and key U.S. efforts in the Middle East, Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere will depend on intelligence collaboration and diplomatic assistance. To put it bluntly, if the United States wants to exercise global leadership, it cannot simply compel; it must also *persuade*—and sometimes it will also need to *compromise*. Other states will be easier to convince if they see U.S. leadership as serving their interests—at least some of the time—rather than just its own.

Thus, the United States faces a clear choice. It can adopt a unilateral approach to foreign policy and eschew multilateral cooperation except strictly on its own terms. Such a policy may be tempting, because U.S. power allows it to bear the short-term costs of a unilateralist policy. But an independent course would make it nearly impossible for the United States to exercise the kind of influence and leadership it has enjoyed for the past fifty years. Alternatively, the United States can maintain a principled commitment to multilateralism, using its power to ensure that most agreements are in the American interest. In other words, it can be unilateralist and disengaged, or it can be multilateralist and fully engaged. But trying to wield global leadership unilaterally is not going to work. No country—not even the United States—is strong enough for that.

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#### NOTES

1. The best recent analysis of America’s global position is William C. Wohlforth’s “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security*, Summer 1999, pp. 5–41. Also useful is Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).
2. See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), chap. 7.
3. Quoted in Melvyn J. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 18–9.
4. Robert Jervis, “International Primacy: Is the Game Worth the Candle?” *International Security*, Spring 1993, p. 52.
5. Samuel P. Huntington, “Why International Primacy Matters,” *International Security*, Spring 1993, p. 83.

6. The United States had the largest combined military forces at the end of World War II, and its wartime production dwarfed those of all the other participants. For evocative statistics on this point, see Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 309–10, and his *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 353–7.
7. See Joanne Gowa, *Allies, Adversaries, and International Trade* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994).
8. This point is emphasized by Wohlforth, “Stability of a Unipolar World.”
9. Josef Joffe, “Europe’s American Pacifier,” *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1984, pp. 64–82, and his “‘Bismarck’ or ‘Britain’? Toward an American Grand Strategy after Bipolarity,” *International Security*, Spring 1995, p. 94; also Christopher Bertram, *Europe in the Balance: Securing the Peace Won in the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1995).
10. See Dale C. Copeland, “Economic Interdependence and War: A Theory of Trade Expectations,” *International Security*, Spring 1996, pp. 5–41; and Barry Buzan, “Economic Structure and International Security: The Limits of the Liberal Case,” *International Organization*, Autumn 1984, pp. 597–624.
11. The seminal analysis of this issue is Joseph M. Grieco, “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism,” *International Organization*, Summer 1988, pp. 485–507. For further discussion, see David Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993).
12. Since 1945, trade has grown from 7 percent to 21 percent of total world income. See Robert Gilpin, *The Challenge of Global Capitalism: The World Economy in the 21st Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), p. 20.
13. See Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 376; and also Gilpin, *Challenge of Global Capitalism*, chap. 2 and pp. 347–57.
14. See Lloyd Gruber, *Ruling the World: Power Politics and the Rise of Supranational Institutions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000).
15. This capacity has been demonstrated repeatedly by the current U.S. administration, which rejected the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, the verification protocol of the Biological Weapons Convention, the land-mines convention, the agreement establishing an international criminal court, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and a number of other prominent international conventions. Reasonable people can disagree about the merits of each of these decisions, but they do reveal America’s capacity to “go it alone” in the face of nearly unanimous international opposition.
16. An anecdote from the end of the Cold War illustrates the problem nicely. When Mikhail Gorbachev complained to Secretary of State George Shultz that U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union was “one of ‘extorting more and more concessions,’” Shultz smiled and replied, ‘I’m weeping for you.’” Quoted in Wohlforth, “Realism and the End of the Cold War,” p. 121.
17. Quoted in Leffler, *Preponderance of Power*, p. 16.
18. For further discussion, see Stephen M. Walt, “Musclebound: The Limits of U.S. Power,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March–April 1999, pp. 44–8.
19. Among other things, fewer than half of all Americans believe that “defending our allies’ security” is a “very important” goal for the United States. See John E. Rielly, ed., *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1999* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1999), pp. 7–9, 16 [Emphasis supplied].
20. See James M. Lindsay, “The New Apathy: How an Uninterested Public Is Reshaping Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, September–October 2000, p. 2.
21. See Walt, *Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. press, 1987), chaps. 2, 5, and 8.
22. As one Russian commentator put it, the treaty was “an act of friendship against America.” See “Russia and China Sign ‘Friendship Treaty,’” *New York Times*, 17 July 2001, p. A1.
23. See Larry Rohter, “A Man with Big Ideas, a Small Country . . . and Oil,” *New York Times*,

- 24 September 2000, p. D3; and "India a Great Power: Putin," *Times of India Online*, 2 October 2000, on the World Wide Web: [www.timesofindia.com/today/02worl3.htm](http://www.timesofindia.com/today/02worl3.htm).
24. I discuss these tendencies in, "Keeping the World 'Off-Balance': Self-Restraint and U.S. Foreign Policy," in *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power*, ed. G. John Ikenberry (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 2002).
25. Although critics were quick to suggest that these strikes were intended to distract U.S. opinion from President Clinton's domestic troubles, the raids do raise the legitimate question of how a great power should respond to ambiguous evidence that avowed enemies are preparing a potentially lethal attack.
26. Quoted in P. Edward Haley, *Revolution and Intervention: The Diplomacy of Taft and Wilson with Mexico, 1910-1917* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970), p. 100. Or as Teddy Roosevelt famously said, "Speak softly and carry a big stick."
27. Support from Great Britain alone will normally not suffice to legitimate the use of force by the United States.
28. See Robert Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987); Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984); and W. Anthony Lake, "Wrestling with Third World Radical Regimes: Theory and Practice," in *U.S. Foreign Policy: Agenda 1985-86*, ed. John W. Sewell, Richard E. Feinberg, and Valeriana Kallab (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1985).
29. See Robert S. Litwak, *Rogue States and U.S. Foreign Policy: Containment after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2000).
30. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); see also Stephen M. Walt, "Building up New Bogeymen," *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1997, pp. 177-89.
31. Chinese and Russian officials have warned that U.S. development of NMD would force them to build additional weapons or develop countermeasures. The director-general for arms control at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sha Zukang, summarized China's position by admitting that "to defeat your defenses we'll have to spend a lot of money[.] . . . but otherwise the United States will feel it can attack anyone at any time, and that isn't tolerable." U.S. assurances that the system was limited to attacks by rogue states have been unpersuasive; in Sha's words, "How can we base our own national security on your assurances of good will?" See Eric Eckholm, "China Says U.S. Missile Shield Could Force a Nuclear Buildup," *New York Times*, 11 May 2000, pp. A1, A6.
32. See *Little Support for Expanding War on Terrorism*, Pew Global Attitudes Project, Pew Research Center for People and the Press (Washington, D.C.: December 19, 2001).
33. See Martin Walker, "What Europeans Think of America," *World Policy Journal*, Summer 2000, pp. 26-38; Francois Heisbourg, "American Hegemony? Perceptions of the U.S. Abroad," *Survival*, Winter 1999-2000, pp. 5-19; and Peter W. Rodman, *Uneasy Giant: The Challenges to American Predominance* (Washington, D.C.: Nixon Center, 2000).
34. According to Richard Haass, director of policy planning at the U.S. Department of State, the administration is committed to "multilateralism a la carte." In other words, it is willing to cooperate on some issues but not on others. If most states believe that the United States is not interested in any of the items on the global menu, however, this seemingly sensible approach will not solve the problem.

