

A Grand Strategy of Restraint and Renewal,

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Today the U.S. grand strategy debate suffers from an excess of accord. In this testimony I will outline current grand strategy, offer a critique, and suggest an alternative, the Grand Strategy of Restraint and Renewal.

The mainstream position is that the U.S. should have a long global agenda of security goals including the struggle with terrorism, rescue and reconstruction of failed states, containment or overthrow of “rogue” states, the spread of democracy, prevention of proliferation, the retention and extension of Cold War alliances, the security of the Persian Gulf, and a very watchful eye on China. These missions are seen to require a military force that is in most respects quantitatively and qualitatively superior to almost any conceivable combination of other states. It is simply assumed that this force will be regularly employed on missions of every kind. It is unquestioned that these forces will regularly be stationed in large numbers across the globe.

Disagreements are few, and mainly tactical. Many policy analysts associated with the Democratic Party believe that international institutions are useful instruments of U.S. foreign policy, and should be nurtured. Many Republicans view them as impediments. Many Democrats are more inclined to give diplomacy a chance; some Republicans have less patience. Until recently, many Democrats hoped for a new set of nuclear arms control agreements to manage the post Cold War world while Republicans wanted the U.S. to have a free hand. This has changed recently, judging from speeches by Senator McCain.

Perhaps the strongest disagreements remain on Iraq; many Republican analysts, and Senator McCain, wish to fight on until Iraq is “a stable, prosperous, and democratic state...that poses no threat to its neighbors and contributes to the defeat of terrorists,” with indigenous military forces fully able to protect the country. These are ambitious but amorphous objectives, the achievement of which will not be self evident, but rather

depend heavily on the judgment of U.S. leaders. Senator Obama, and many analysts associated with the Democratic Party think it wise to set a date certain by which most, but not all U.S. troops would leave Iraq. This process would still take nearly two years, and the residual force levels may prove surprisingly high. On the whole, however, these disagreements are dwarfed by the strategic consensus on a forward, activist, omnidirectional, and militarily muscular global strategy.

This strategy has proven costly and self defeating. It saps U.S. power, infantilizes U.S. allies, prompts other states to work against the U.S., and encourages other peoples to blame the U.S. for their troubles. The U.S. has fought five significant military engagements since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Only one of those engagements, the overthrow of the Taliban in Operation Enduring Freedom can reasonably have been considered essential. The two Balkan engagements still have not led to stable political outcomes; U.S. troops remain in Kosovo ten years later. Iraq has consumed vast sums of money and many American lives; despite tactical progress there is still no end in sight. In these engagements the U.S. teaches its adversaries how best to combat its power. This increases the difficulty of future military engagements, which necessitates still greater defense investments to recover U.S. advantages.

U.S. military engagements prove more difficult than expected because the U.S. consistently underestimates the power of nationalism, and the propensity of modern peoples to oppose outsiders who try to manage their politics. The U.S. often overestimates its capacity to reengineer the politics of other countries in any case. Though globalization brings many good things with it, it also brings with it an intensification of nationalism and other forms of identity politics. Traditional societies disrupted by rapid economic and social change are often seduced by leaders who trumpet the safety and predictability offered by old traditions, and the security of group affiliations.

Finally these engagements have a hidden political cost. Policy makers persuade the American people to support these interventions by telling them that the wars, peace enforcement, peacekeeping, or nation building exercise will be cheap and easy. When they turn out otherwise, public confidence is eroded. Overall, policy makers seem unwilling to level with the American people about the costs of U.S. Grand Strategy. The

entire global war on terror has been financed on borrowed money, perhaps because U.S. leaders have been unwilling to risk the questions that would be precipitated by a tax increase.

Others states take advantage of U.S. activism. Some free ride or cheap ride; others drive recklessly. Europeans and Japanese spend a much lower share of GDP on defense than does the U.S., despite their high standard of living, competent military leadership, and effective military industries. (Three quarters of the European members of NATO spend between 1 and 2 % of GDP on defense; Japan spends just under 1%, while the U.S. spends a bit more than 4%.) These allies sometimes participate in U.S. led endeavors, but often with so many caveats that their true assistance turns out to be much less than one would expect. Other states feel so secure in the U.S. embrace that they do as they wish. Iraqi politicians take as long as they like to sort out their political differences, secure in our protection. Israel is so comfortable with the U.S. commitment that it expands settlements in the West Bank in contradiction to U.S. views, sometimes announcing its plans within hours of a visit by the U.S. Secretary of State.

U.S. activism causes some states to balance U.S. power, and tempts peoples to blame the U.S. for their troubles. Though few great states actively oppose U.S. power, some do what they can to increase U.S. diplomatic or military costs. Diplomatic cooperation is slow and grudging. Weapons and military technology are exported to aspiring great powers or putative U.S. adversaries. Across the Arab world, the presence of U.S. forces and bases helps convince the disgruntled that the U.S. is the obstacle to their hopes and dreams. This creates new potential recruits for enemies of the U.S..

The U.S. grand strategy consensus, essentially a strategy of sustained global primacy wedded to liberal ideals, needs a rethink. Some students of U.S. grand strategy are proposing an alternative, which some of us are calling “Restraint and Renewal.” “Restraint and Renewal” recognizes that the world is still a hard place; states must rely first on their own resources for their security. In the U.S., these resources must be nurtured. They ought not to be expended profligately. The U.S. should do less abroad. It should use the financial and political resources it saves in that way to renew the foundations of U.S. power, which are here at home. These include fiscal and economic health, social cohesion, and even military readiness. The U.S. would disengage most of

its forces from their fixed bases around the world, but retain the ability to re-engage its military power for its own interests. The U.S. would make clear that others have first to prove that they have done everything they can and should do in their own defense.

What strategic problems does the U.S. face and how should they be addressed? The U.S. is already quite secure, but it does need to keep a watchful eye on the global balance of power, suppress Al Qaeda, and do what it can to limit the risks posed by nuclear proliferation. At the same time, it must ensure that its efforts to address these threats do not become self defeating.

The U.S. is a rich and capable nation, separated by the oceans from the other great powers in the world. It is impossible to conquer and extremely difficult to coerce. The U.S. fought two world wars and one Cold War to prevent militaristic empires from conquering the richest states in Europe and Asia. We feared that those empires would put their conquests to evil use, assembling enough resources to threaten U.S. security in North America. With the Soviet collapse, there is no such threat at either end of the Eurasian land mass. There is a natural balance of power, reinforced in the west by independent British and French nuclear forces, and in the east by massive geographical barriers that separate China from India and Japan. Nevertheless, the world is undergoing rapid change, and these regional balances could someday erode to the disadvantage of the U.S. Thus, the military requirement is to retain a capability at all times to shift the balance of power in Eurasia in favor of whomever we like. This does not necessitate the current U.S. alliance system, nor the current distribution of ready U.S. forces.

U.S. traditional alliances need reform; they waste scarce resources and encourage free riding. NATO is the best example, but relationships with Japan and Israel also need a rethink. NATO has outlived its usefulness. Europe is safer than it has ever been in modern times. The Soviet Union is no more; Russia is a mere shadow of its former incarnation. Germany, France, and Britain are partners in the European Union—the return of their old enmities is scarcely conceivable. Europeans spend less on defense than does the U.S., which suggests that they feel quite secure. The European Union is the natural focus of European security cooperation, but it develops in fits and starts, perhaps because member states feel no pressure. The continued existence of the NATO military command structure allows the Europeans to remain unworried about their security future;

it may hamper the progress of the European Union. There is no longer any need for U.S. ground or tactical air forces to be stationed in Europe. Thus, NATO should be transformed into a political alliance. The U.S. should exit the military command structure; the Europeans can keep it, or transfer it to the European Union, or dissolve it if they are as unconcerned about threats as they seem.

A second key problem is Al Qaeda. Its members and sympathizers pose no threat to conquer the U.S. or even to upset the balance of power among the other great powers of the world. Al Qaeda does threaten U.S. safety, as we tragically learned. The U.S. must act to keep this organization on the run, so that it spends more resources defending itself and fewer plotting against the U.S.. And the U.S. must put as many barriers between Al Qaeda and the U.S. as can efficiently be arranged. That said, it is critically important not to add strength to this adversary. Excessive U.S. activism, including the use of force, provides tinder for Al Qaeda propagandists, as they try to blame the problems of the Islamic community, especially the Arab world, on the presence of U.S. power. Instead, the U.S. needs to keep a low profile in the Islamic world. Many regimes there fear Al Qaeda as much as we do. The U.S. should cooperate in the shadows with their intelligence and police forces to combat Al Qaeda. Rarely, will the U.S. need to use force directly, but when necessary, it is preferable to rely on short, sharp special operations rather than occupations.

In the Middle East and Persian Gulf the U.S. should rely heavily on naval power to backstop the struggle against terrorism, and to deter local aggressors. The pre-1990 model should be resurrected, in which local states that hope for U.S. assistance would build bare bases, reception facilities, and fuel depots to assist a U.S. return. This would have the twin effect of lowering the salience of U.S. forces in the lives of populations that are predisposed to blame the U.S. for their problems, and endowing rich allies with more responsibility for their own defense.

The U.S. should also undertake some proactive missions to improve its image in the Islamic world. When natural disasters strike, the power projection capability of U.S. forces, especially naval forces, can be of great initial utility. The U.S. should be willing to assist in these relief efforts when its assistance is requested. The U.S. reaped huge political dividends for its assistance after the Asian Tsunami. This is the best kind of

humanitarian operation because it involves no shooting, and has an obvious exit strategy—when the initial damage to transportation infrastructure is repaired, civilian relief organizations can take over.

A third key problem is nuclear weapons in the wrong hands. It is a sad fact that nuclear weapons are no longer mysterious. States of modest economic and technical capacity are able to build them. The U.S. should do what it can to slow the proliferation of nuclear weapons by supporting prudent arms control agreements. But the U.S. should not be tempted into preventive, counter-proliferation wars. They will seldom be as cheap as advertised, nor as effective. The most important antidote to the risks posed by nuclear proliferation is already in the hands of the U.S.—our own nuclear forces. The U.S. would retaliate against any state that used nuclear weapons against the U.S. Moreover, the U.S. should make clear that states that deliberately provide nuclear weapons to non state actors will be held similarly accountable. That said, so long as there are nuclear weapons and the materials to make them in the world, no one can promise that the risks of a nuclear terrorist attack are zero. U.S. intelligence and homeland security efforts must make a sustained effort to prevent such terrible events. The U.S. must also, however, avoid the temptation to assume huge and enduring political and military costs in a futile effort to banish these risks.

The U.S. must also carefully reconsider other purposes to which its military power has been committed. The two most important new purposes are energy security and reconstruction of failed states. The first has mainly to do with prosperity and the second with philanthropy. On the whole these are very difficult projects for military power and for two basic reasons. U.S. military power is wildly expensive to employ and like all military power it is blunt instrument. Including the emergency supplemental appropriation signed into law on June 30, the U.S. has already spent or committed to spending, using the narrowest definition, 650 billion dollars on the Iraq war. If the Iraq war is partly about the security of future energy supplies, it is difficult to see the economic case. For the price of the war, the strategic petroleum reserve could have been filled eight times at present oil prices of 140 dollars a barrel. Since the end of the Cold War, a Persian Gulf contingency was taken to justify half of the U.S. conventional force structure. This represents an enduring expenditure stream of hundreds of billions of

dollars. If the security of energy supplies to protect U.S. prosperity is the purpose of this effort, then other uses of the money could presumably buy equal energy security without the attendant risk of war. Military power is a poor way to ensure prosperity.

A consensus has formed around the need to intervene in “failed states.” In the Clinton years, humanitarian concerns motivated military action. In the Bush years, a counter terror argument has been added to the case: failed states are thought to be breeding grounds or base areas for terrorists. Combining the two rationales produces a peculiar coalition of liberals and conservatives in favor of lengthy, complex, and uncertain projects. If a state has failed, it likely suffers tremendous organic political problems, which will resist easy resolution. While much has been learned about the reconstruction of failed states, there is no recipe book for success. If there were, Bosnia and Kosovo would no longer be under the armed tutelage of the E.U. and NATO respectively. Statistics suggest that the Iraq effort is now going better from a security point of view, but the country is still quite dangerous, and political reconciliation has barely begun.

If a state has failed, and descended into internal violence, U.S. military power will be engaged in peace enforcement or counter insurgency operations, or both. These operations typically require large numbers of ground troops; at least 20 soldiers per 1000 of population to be policed is the usual rule of thumb. The numbers mount quickly. Then Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki estimated correctly when he suggested in February of 2003 that the reconstruction of Iraq would require hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops. If there is local resistance, it only takes a few competent insurgents to bring out the ferocious side of the U.S. military. The combination of the facts of occupation and the regular application of U.S. combat power can make a great many local enemies. Young men of military age are plentiful in the developing world, as are simple but effective infantry weapons. The combination quickly raises costs. Resistance movements embedded in perhaps half of Iraq’s population of 27 million people consumed all the energies of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps for the last five years. Military leaders admit that U.S. ground forces have sacrificed some of their skills in conventional combat to retool for counter insurgency. Other countries of possible interest such as Iran or Pakistan have much larger populations than Iraq. The U.S.

military is simply not large enough to support the political reconstruction of most other societies, even if we had a good understanding of how to do it, which we do not.

The United States is a powerful country. Nevertheless, it is not as powerful as the foreign policy establishment believes. Political, military, and economic costs are mounting from U.S. actions abroad. At the same time, the U.S. has paid too little attention to problems at home. Over the last decade Americans became accustomed to a standard of living that could only be financed on borrowed money. U.S. foreign policy elites have become accustomed to an activist grand strategy that they have increasingly funded on borrowed money as well. The days of easy money are over. During these years, the U.S. failed to make critical investments in infrastructure and human capital. The U.S. is destined for a period of belt tightening; it must raise taxes and cut spending. The quantities involved seem so massive that it is difficult to see how DOD can escape being at least one of the bill payers. We should seize this opportunity to re-conceptualize U.S. grand strategy from top to bottom.