

Rethinking Restraint: Why It Fails in Practice

The ongoing pandemic crisis is likely to reshape many national policies and social habits, and foreign policy will be no less affected than other areas. Given the massive and ongoing costs of the crisis and the renewed focus on the security of the US homeland, American popular opinion could turn dramatically against global engagement and defense spending.

Such a shift in public opinion, if it were to occur, would build on a line of thinking that was already gaining considerable momentum—the call for far-reaching restraint and retrenchment in US foreign and national security policy. A growing list of scholars, analysts, and pundits maintain that US global ambitions have become excessive as well as counterproductive, and that the United States should shed many of its commitments abroad. Even before the current crisis, this school of thought was enjoying a renaissance: dozens of new books and articles on the theme had emerged, the Trump administration questioned some US alliance obligations and sought to extricate the United States from multiple conflicts, leading Democratic candidates for president railed against “endless wars,” and major contributions from restraint-oriented donors on the left and right underwrote new think tanks and research programs devoted to the idea.¹

A rethinking of many key assumptions of US national security policy is overdue, and proponents of restraint have delivered important warnings. On issues ranging from NATO enlargement to the war in Afghanistan, US post-Cold War ambitions have indeed outpaced the nation’s ability and will to satisfy them.² The United States has sometimes succumbed to a temptation to remake the world—as in Iraq and Libya—with actions that have triggered

Michael J. Mazarr is a senior political scientist at the RAND corporation, and his most recent book is *Leap of Faith: Hubris, Negligence, and America’s Greatest Foreign Policy Tragedy* (Public Affairs, 2019). He can be followed on Twitter @MMazarr.

© 2020 The Elliott School of International Affairs
The Washington Quarterly • 43:2 pp. 7–32
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1771042>

immense human suffering, and ended up, as the historian Samuel Moyn has acidly put it, “lionizing unilateralism and illegality in a good cause.”³ On other issues, Washington has often plowed ahead heedless of the interests of rivals, producing dangerous backlash. Proponents of restraint have played and continue to play a critical role in highlighting the risks of overweening ambition.

However, the utility of the concept of restraint is limited by the literature’s often overly binary conception of US foreign and security policy. Much of this literature divides the worldviews that drive US strategy into two broad caricatures—primacy or liberal hegemony at one extreme, and restraint at the other. Such an approach overlooks a huge, untidy middle ground where the views of most US national security officials reside and where most US policies operate. That middle ground tends to reflect far more nuance, and indeed instinctive restraint, than the stereotypes offered by many restraint proponents would suggest. Bumper-sticker phrases like “liberal hegemony” simply do not capture either the views of most US national security officials or the actual behavior of the United States as a strategic actor.

This binary approach produces two essential flaws in the argument for restraint. One has to do with its diagnosis: in their attacks on current policy and the associated

This binary approach produces two essential flaws in the argument for restraint.

“national security elite,” advocates of restraint repeatedly descend into straw-person characterizations that exaggerate the degree to which concepts of primacy or militarized liberal value promotion grip the thinking of US officials or the outcomes of US policy.

And when it turns to prescriptions, the school of thought cannot remain pure to its categorical rhetoric and still deal with the complexities and dilemmas that plague US foreign

policy. When its proponents try to do so—by, for example, accepting the need for US presence in Asia to counter a belligerent China—its specific policy proposals end up reflecting something not essentially different from a modified version of the current approach.

This essay begins by reviewing three major claims of the restraint literature: that US foreign and security policy reflects a relentless drive for primacy or hegemony; that a homogenous national security elite urges US policy in that direction; and that, partly as a result, US foreign policy, especially since the end of the Cold War, has been an abject failure. None of these arguments stands up to scrutiny, in large measure because they deal in extremes and stereotypes rather than reflecting the more complex realities of US policy. The essay then argues that the policy prescriptions of restraint proponents reflect more qualifications and exceptions than the stringent language of the school of thought would suggest. Finally, the

essay briefly outlines an alternative approach designed to cure some of the excesses of US policy without abandoning the positive effects of US global engagement.

US Foreign Policy: Caricature versus Reality

In the eyes of proponents of restraint, the reigning concepts that guide America's role in the world embody a limitless drive for supremacy and power that has produced an infatuation with militarism and a litany of interventions and wars. "There is one dominant grand strategy in US politics," two advocates for restraint contend, "which is primacy, also known as liberal hegemony."⁴ "The vast majority of US foreign policy makers are devotees of *primacy*," concludes another recent essay.⁵ The historian Stephen Wertheim refers to a post-Cold War US approach that "gave pride of place to military threats and methods" and that "spares no expense for military hegemony."⁶ The scholar Barry Posen, in one of the defining works of the restraint literature, points to an overriding implication: "the United States has grown incapable of moderating its ambitions in international politics."⁷

Immediately, this portrait of militarized liberal hegemony in search of primacy simplifies a more complex reality: the concepts of primacy and liberal interventionism overlap on some issues but diverge starkly on others. More importantly, much of the literature on restraint blends these various concepts in order to fuel what quickly becomes an essentialist critique of US foreign and security policy. Proponents argue that US policy is not merely imperfect at the margins—its basic assumptions and impulses are *fundamentally* unsound, and it must be not merely pruned but substantially uprooted. Yet, by depicting the guiding concepts of US policy with such extreme and unconditional language, these diagnoses tend to deal in caricatures and straw people rather than realities.

This polemical approach emerges in restraint proponents' treatment of the basic US foreign policy record. It has had its share of excesses, but the record betrays far more limits, hesitation, and, in fact, restraint than the labels of primacy and liberal hegemony would suggest—something apparent in the repeated tendency to avoid interventions, major post-Cold War cuts in defense spending and global posture, and the constraints on liberal value promotion.

The Frequent Impulse to Moderation

The restraint literature downplays the often-powerful reluctance with which successive US administrations have grappled with most decisions to intervene. US action in cases like the Balkan wars and even Libya only came with great hesitancy and after fierce internal debates.⁸ The United States has shunned many opportunities for large-scale interventions in the last generation alone—in Somalia, Rwanda, Syria, and elsewhere.⁹ US administrations did not act in crises in the Great Lakes

region of Africa and two major examples of Russian aggression in Georgia and Ukraine.¹⁰ An infamous case of non-intervention was the Darfur tragedy in the Sudan, when credible accusations of genocide did not prompt US action.¹¹ The United States would never have invaded either Afghanistan or Iraq had it not been for 9/11; indeed, then-NSC official Richard Clarke and others begged two

The selectivity of US action, rather than a general impulse to intervene, is the dominant lesson.

administrations to strike al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan for months beforehand, to no avail.¹² In regard to humanitarian intervention broadly speaking, the *selectivity* of US action, rather than a general impulse to intervene, is the dominant lesson.¹³

Even with regard to Vietnam, two US presidents (Kennedy and Eisenhower) struggled to avoid an open-ended US commitment; when the United States did engage, it was because Lyndon Johnson felt a need to stand up to communist aggression and protect his personal

reputation, but he was hardly enthusiastic about the prospect. He was painfully conflicted about the war and deeply regretted having to fight it.¹⁴ In other words, when US interventionism has occurred, it has often been reactive and half-hearted rather than aggressively ambitious.

In fact, the alleged epicenter of US global military power—the Department of Defense and the military services—have forcefully *opposed* many interventions in places like the Balkans, Somalia, and Libya, believing they should husband their power for major wars. The two leading modern conceptual articulations of criteria for going to war—the Weinberger and Powell Doctrines—came from senior defense officials, and both represented efforts to constrain, not liberate, the use of force.¹⁵ Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates told a graduating class at West Point that “any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should ‘have his head examined,’ as General MacArthur so delicately put it,”¹⁶ reflecting a widely held view at Defense—one far afield from the ideas of unrestrained primacy.

A similar impulse for limits has emerged in major diplomatic initiatives. In a recent essay outlining a restraint agenda, Stephen Wertheim suggests that the United States should “seek to normalize relations with North Korea” in part with a nuclear deal, and that it should “end its grudge match” with Iran.¹⁷ In fact, the United States at one time embraced *both* these ideas in the form of the Agreed Framework with North Korea and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. The later US desertion of these accords was prompted by hawkish factions in two Republican administrations, not an indiscriminate national hegemonic inclination.¹⁸

Nor can US involvement in foreign wars and interventions usually be traced to a hegemonic desire to spread liberal values. A missionary attitude in foreign policy and liberal value promotion agenda may help lay the groundwork or justify the public case for unnecessary commitments and may be responsible for a few of them. But the largest interventions—Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, the Balkan wars, Afghanistan, and Iraq—were all *primarily* motivated by security considerations.¹⁹ Some of these actions may have been excessive to begin with or become so over time, and the security concerns that drove them may have been based on bad information or inflated fears. But they were not fueled by the boundless commitment to primacy and liberal value promotion described by many advocates of restraint.

Limits to Ambition: By the Numbers

Broadly speaking, then, the default setting of US foreign policy is hardly one of fervent interventionism. In terms of actual military posture and spending, if the United States had truly embraced hegemonic policies, there would be a trajectory of continually rising commitments, military spending, and interventions since 1945. Yet the actual record is starkly different. Table 1 tells an interesting story about one key focus of the restraint proponents—global military presence.

Between the late 1980s and roughly 2018, US troop levels declined slightly in Japan, more than 40 percent in Korea, and 80 percent in Europe. The result was that, as the Pew Research Center put it, by 2016 the “U.S. military overseas presence [was] at a 60-year low,” falling well below 200,000 after having reached a peak of 1.2 million in the late 1960s and remaining at over 600,000 as recently as 1990. In 2016, only 15 percent of active-duty US military troops were deployed overseas—the lowest proportion since 1957.²¹

One partial exception to this trend, of course, is the Middle East, where after a history of “extremely light force presence”²² before 1990, US regional deployments expanded across the region in the wake of the Gulf War and ramped up dramatically during the Iraq War. Various factors—including the flow of units into and out of the region, the use of private contractors to fulfill some functions, and limits on public information—make it impossible to put a precise figure on US deployments; the Congressional Research Service has estimated that as of 2019, there were 60,000 to 80,000 US troops in the Central Command

Table 1: US Foreign Troop Presence in Allied States, 1985–2018²⁰

Country / Region	US Troop Level: 1985–90	US Troop Level: 2016–18
Europe / NATO	350,000	62,000
South Korea	40,000–45,000	24,000
Japan	50,000–60,000	53,000 (counting Navy personnel on ships deployed nearby)

(CENTCOM) area of responsibility.²³ Yet even here, these numbers are well down from the recent peak: the Obama administration's withdrawal of most US combat forces from Iraq meant that numbers there plummeted from over 160,000 in 2006–07 to residual levels by 2012.²⁴

The story of US defense spending from 1988 to 9/11 is also one of gradual decline.

The story of US defense spending from 1988 to 9/11 is also one of gradual decline. All told, “inflation-adjusted military spending fell by *one-third* in the 1990s.”²⁵ The defense budget shows a similar pattern over a longer time period—a downward slope from about 16 percent of GDP in the early 1950s to less than 3 percent by the end of the 1990s, and then, after a bump from 9/11 and the war on terror, back down to 3.1 percent in 2018.²⁶

(Even before the current pandemic, the Congressional Budget Office had projected a further decline to 2.8 percent of GDP by 2029.²⁷) The United States also took advantage of the end of the Cold War to slash its nuclear arsenal from a peak of 31,255 weapons to fewer than 5,000.²⁸

Therefore, had an advocate of restraint called in 1989 for a one-third cut in defense spending, an 80 percent reduction in troops in Europe, and an 85 percent cut in the US nuclear arsenal, they would have gotten everything they asked for. Restraint proponents would doubtless suggest that spending remains too high and that US global posture—with hundreds of bases and deployments across dozens of countries—remains too elaborate. Both may be true, and further cuts may be called for. But the record of US foreign policy does not reflect a one-way trajectory of defense posture and spending in service of primacy and liberal hegemony.

An Inconsistent Urge to Transform the World

In his most recent book, eminent realist John Mearsheimer defines US hegemonic aspirations in especially absolute terms, specifically regarding the promotion of liberal values. The focus of Mearsheimer's ire is liberal hegemony, which he defines as “an ambitious strategy in which a state aims to turn as many countries as possible into liberal democracies like itself while also promoting an open international economy and building international institutions” through “an active policy of regime change.” Liberal hegemony thus inevitably becomes a “highly interventionist foreign policy that involves fighting wars,” “doing significant social engineering in countries throughout the world,” and “toppling autocracies” which, according to Mearsheimer, results in an “abysmal record of failure.”²⁹ Stephen Walt joins Mearsheimer in condemning the pursuit of such liberal hegemony as a “costly failure.”³⁰

It is not clear at what country this critique is aimed, but it certainly is not the United States. During the Cold War, of course, many criticized US foreign policy specifically for *embracing* many dictatorships—from Pinochet’s Chile to the Shah’s Iran to authoritarian governments in Guatemala. Since the Cold War’s end, the United States has had active regime change policies aimed at only a handful of states. Even with regard to some of these, the record is full of swerves: the United States infamously toyed with engaging Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in the 1980s before gradually sliding toward an unofficial regime change policy by the late 1990s. (Even after fighting Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in the Gulf War, the Bush administration famously decided *not* to overthrow him, a decision that reflected a remarkable degree of restraint.³¹) US regime change ambitions with both Iran and Cuba were effectively shelved by the Obama administration (even if revived, at least with Iran, by the Trump administration).

The United States has persistently encouraged the gradual advance of liberal values through more patient means such as broad-based engagement, support for human rights activists, and investments in civil society organizations. But these indirect, long-term approaches are a far cry from the vision of a militarized liberal hegemony.

As an example of the gap between this caricature and actual US policy, consider the US approach to the roster of autocratic states in 1990. Many of these were clustered in Africa; the United States called for improved human rights policies on the continent but had no real, active regime change policies toward any of these governments. Globally, Washington counted many regimes then defined as illiberal—including Saudi Arabia, Oman, Indonesia, Egypt, and Morocco—as friends. It was busily embracing a policy of engaging China, the world’s biggest autocratic regime, and would soon be on the road to mending ties and eventually initiating a strategic partnership with Vietnam. The direct clashes that did exist with autocratic states (largely Cuba, Iran, Iraq, and North Korea) were the product of specific histories or aggressive behavior on the part of these regimes, not any generalized crusade against illiberalism.

To be sure, dreams of liberal value promotion have always inspired US goals and have ornamented some US policies since 1945. The rise of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and related interventionist doctrines in the 2000s did help produce what may be the single example of an intervention prompted *largely* by such considerations—the European and US action in Libya in 2011. Even here, that outcome followed a US effort to embrace the regime: when Washington secured Libyan promises of nonproliferation in 2003, it was happy to remove sanctions on Muammar Qaddafi’s government and move toward rapprochement without much attention to human rights. Washington presumably hoped that such engagement would produce reform and change, but this slow, steady, peaceful approach to value promotion is presumably just the sort of alternative to militarized hegemony

that restraint advocates would want. Beyond Libya, the allegedly belligerent approach to liberal hegemony has been evident in remarkably few cases.

To some degree, Mearsheimer is actually making an argument about a momentary period of surplus power, not more perennial motives behind US strategy. He claims that it is not merely a liberal hegemonic impulse that has produced US interventionism, but the fact that “the United States was so powerful in the aftermath of the Cold War that it could adopt a profoundly liberal foreign policy.”³² If America’s relative power ebbs, he predicts, so will its liberal ambitions.

It is certainly true that, after 1989, America’s preeminent position allowed it to expand its ambitions to an unhealthy degree. But this temptation has been fading for years; the existence of surplus power, for example, cannot solely explain US interventions in Afghanistan or Iraq, neither of which would have occurred absent 9/11.³³ Any great power enjoying unrivaled predominance will be tempted to widen its ambitions. That US foreign policy did not run even *more* amok during these years, given its massive surplus power and the lack of any real countervailing force, is perhaps the greater wonder.

In sum, the record of US foreign policy, both during and after the Cold War, does not look like anything close to an unalloyed embrace of primacy and liberal hegemony. It is the story of potent but also constrained ambitions, repeated efforts to meddle in other societies, and many refusals to do so. It is a complex

US foreign policy is a complex history of partial global engagement marred by excessive tragedies.

history of partial global engagement marred by a handful of truly excessive tragedies (dominated by a single case—Iraq—which as of 2012 accounted for 67 percent of casualties and 64 percent of costs of all post-1990 US interventions³⁴)—shaped at every turn by kaleidoscopic mixtures of political impulses and constraints, military realities, personality conflicts, ambitions tempered by risk, and many other influences. It is not a record that looks anything like the portrait of hegemony found in much of the restraint literature.

There is No Sinister National Security Elite

Many restraint proponents use a second major claim to buttress their argument that US strategy is fundamentally invalid and should be radically scaled back: US overreach reflects the malign influence of a devious national security elite fired with dangerous visions of primacy and liberal hegemony. Not all restraint advocates make this argument, but it is a dominant theme in some of the literature’s most important works. Stephen Walt’s 2018 book *The Hell of Good*

Intentions, for example, is an extended indictment of this group—including current and former US officials, congressional staff, think tank experts, and others—which he describes as a “dysfunctional elite of privileged insiders who are frequently disdainful of alternative perspectives.”³⁵ According to Walt, promoting an interventionist foreign policy provides jobs, status, and access to high-paid consultancies and political power to this group, which comprises an exclusive clique of insiders who attend the same schools and clubs and believe, for the most part, the same things about US power.

The historian and writer Andrew Bacevich denounces the same alleged cabal, agreeing that “the ideology of national security . . . serves the interests of those who created the national security state and those who still benefit from its continued existence”—interests that include “status, influence, and considerable wealth.”³⁶ The result is an addiction to global hegemony and military force, a tendency to seek out unnecessary enemies and commitments, and a crippling conformism that quashes dissent.³⁷ US national security elites at the end of the Cold War, he argues in his most recent book, coalesced around primacy with “something close to unanimity.”³⁸

It is not clear how to treat such sprawling assertions when the reality—the jumble of motivations, views, relationships, and ambitions of the tens of thousands of people who comprise the national security community—is obviously so much more complex. Do all US foreign policy officials or experts support global engagement because it grants them jobs or speaking opportunities? How many actually attended the same schools or even know one another, and what effect does this have on their views? Do all of them embrace primacy, and to the same degree? Apart from collections of anecdotes, those convinced of the existence of such a homogenous elite offer no objective evidence—such as surveys, interviews, or comprehensive literature reviews—to back up these sweeping claims. “By and large,” Bacevich insists in just one example, “members of the national security elite hold the public in remarkably low regard,” citing as proof a single, dated quote from Dean Acheson.³⁹

The real “national security elite,” of course, comprises individuals with starkly opposing opinions. Some favor nuclear arms control, some oppose it; some want more US forces in Europe, some fewer; some continue to support humanitarian interventions, whereas most are now skeptical of them. As a result, profound arguments have erupted within this group over every major foreign policy issue of the last half-century. The scholars and former government officials Hal Brands, Peter Feaver, and William Inboden explain that “intense disputes over the Korean War, the Vietnam War, détente and arms control, the opening to China, and policies in Central America and the Middle East were followed by battles over the Gulf War, NATO expansion, military interventions in Haiti, Somalia, and the Balkans, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—not to mention heated arguments over

positions toward China, Iran, North Korea, Russia, and other issues today.”⁴⁰ Few officials or experts may rail against the broad principle of US global engagement. But on specific policy questions—whether to go to war or conduct a humanitarian intervention, or what policy to adopt toward China or Cuba or Russia or Iran—debates in Washington are deep, intense, and sometimes bitter.

To take just a single example from recent history, the Obama administration’s decision to endorse a surge in Afghanistan came only after extended deliberation and soul-searching, and it included a major, and highly controversial, element of restraint—a very public deadline to begin a graduated withdrawal.⁴¹ If one were to choose the less aggressive or interventionist side of this and a dozen other recent debates, in fact, one could assemble a reasonable facsimile of the more circumscribed foreign policy that proponents of restraint themselves suggest.

Groupthink during times of crisis are exceptions, deeply complicating the argument for restraint.

It is true that groupthink often grips tighter, and dissent ebbs, during times of crisis or war—during the crucial escalation years in Vietnam, for example, or in the weeks after 9/11. The national security community has closed ranks to an unhealthy degree at such moments. But these are exceptions, and they deeply complicate the argument for restraint: if US foreign policy excesses tend to emerge during emotionally charged crises or periods of rabid threat perception, the problem is not a relentless

hegemonic impulse. It is overreaction at specific, desperate moments—something a general commitment to restraint is unlikely to cure.

US Foreign Policy Has Not Been an Abject Failure

A third leading claim in the literature on restraint, an argument central to the essentialist flavor of these critiques, is that modern US foreign policy has been a mostly comprehensive failure. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt list many things that have recently gone wrong in world politics—nuclear proliferation, China’s rise, turmoil in the Arab world—and associate them with the “abysmal record” of US strategy. If it was “supposed to enhance global stability,” they conclude, “it has done a poor job.”⁴² Walt himself mourns the “dismal record” of US foreign policy, one whose track record is “difficult—maybe impossible—to defend.”⁴³ Stephen Wertheim refers to the “bankruptcy” of US strategy, which has “failed to provide security ... damaged the environment, undercut the economic interests of most Americans, and destabilized democracy.”⁴⁴ Barry Posen describes US foreign policy as “costly, wasteful and counterproductive.”⁴⁵

Andrew Bacevich blames a “delusional” foreign policy for “squandering the advantages [the United States] had gained by winning the Cold War.”⁴⁶

In the process of making this case for failure, some restraint advocates mix the records of two distinct US global agendas. Beginning in the 1980s, the United States did embrace, and push the world toward, a supercharged version of capitalism under the banner of neoliberalism and the “Washington Consensus.” While these policies shared something of the general US post-Cold War interventionist zeal, they represent a distinct set of choices from foreign and security policy: one can have US global engagement with or without extreme neoliberal economics. (In fact, a less absolute approach to liberal economics was central to US strategy for decades.⁴⁷)

The actual record of US foreign and security policy since 1945 is a complex mixture of triumph, disaster, and often ambiguous and uncertain outcomes. The contention that it should be viewed as a generalized failure flies in the face of abundant contrary evidence.

A Mixed but Reasonable Record of Success

As it took shape in the decade after 1945, US strategy came to focus on a handful of core objectives: prevail without superpower conflict in the Cold War; build a global network of value-sharing democracies, many of them linked in resilient alliances and trade agreements; encourage the rise of a healthy, rule-governed, and interconnected world economy; and deter attacks by revisionist regional powers. All these things were achieved. Apart from its success in the Cold War, US policy helped to keep South Korea safe from North Korean aggression, preserve the free flow of oil, strengthen a global norm of non-aggression, build a robust global trading system, and more.

A prominent example of such success is the US role in post-World War II Europe—the US effort to prevent communist takeovers, avoid a reversion to nationalism and colonialism, and draw European countries into a normative consensus on liberal politics and economics. As scholars John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan explain, “The U.S. occupation of Germany had a profound impact on the character of German postwar institutions and the political values that guided German behavior at home and abroad.”⁴⁸ Similar effects were achieved in Japan, and these benefits resulted from deep US engagement in these countries and a proactive effort to shape the international environment. One by-product of these specific efforts was to create a shared identity among many great powers built around the values of democracy and free markets, something that persists to this day and strongly favors US interests.⁴⁹

Another example of the qualified success of US policy is in the area of nuclear nonproliferation. Many restraint advocates dismiss the role of US power in helping

avoid proliferation and consider the overall result a failure, pointing to the handful of countries that broke the taboo such as Pakistan and North Korea.⁵⁰ Yet, this record must be compared not against some ideal, but against the reality of the proliferation landscape as it existed from 1945 through about 1970. During that period, US officials worried that dozens of states could eventually seek nuclear weapons. That this did not occur is at least partly due to US policy to reassure allies in ways that reduced the perceived need for the bomb, build norms of non-proliferation and institutions to promote them, impose sanctions on countries that violated the norms, and offer assistance to those that embraced them.⁵¹ With the end of the Cold War, the breakup of the Soviet Union and rising tensions in the Middle East produced risks of a new proliferation cascade in Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere; that it did not occur is at least partly a product of US nonproliferation efforts.

Most indicators of global post-war peace and prosperity showed astonishing improvement.

In fact, most indicators of global peace and prosperity during the post-war period showed astonishing improvement. In constant US dollars, world GDP grew from about \$11.3 trillion in 1960 to almost \$86 trillion in 2018, while per capita GDP rose from about \$3,700 to almost \$11,000.⁵² In 1945, over half the world's population was living in "extreme" poverty; the figure from 2018 is 10 percent. The remarkable catch-up accomplished by developing nations during these decades explains an oft-overlooked fact that even as

inequality *within* nations has grown to dangerous levels, inequality *between* nations has steeply declined.⁵³ In 1945, about 260 million people, or 10 percent of the world's population, lived in democracies; by 2015, well over half the world—four billion people—were citizens of free polities. Data about international conflict show similar patterns: inter-state war has been remarkably infrequent compared to the historical norm since 1945.⁵⁴

Of course, US policy is not uniquely responsible for these remarkable outcomes—at best, it is a contributing variable.⁵⁵ And US errors and occasional brutalities must be counted alongside the successes. But post-war US foreign and security policy has been associated with several important triumphs as well as astonishingly positive global trends. The resulting record is surely mixed, but it is not one of utter disaster.

Explaining Away the Cold War

Some restraint advocates focus their critiques on the post-Cold War period, arguing that US policy went off the rails and truly embraced extreme versions

of primacy after 1989.⁵⁶ They accept the US role in the Cold War as necessary and largely successful⁵⁷ and focus on the post-1989 burst of interventionism in such places as the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan as a departure from a prior habit of moderation. Andrew Bacevich goes as far as to say that “during the Cold War, the United States preferred to husband, rather than expend, its military power”; only more recently, he writes, did it fall into “promiscuous intervention.”⁵⁸ Barry Posen describes US post-World War II policy in Europe as “a crashing success.”⁵⁹

But the messianic language driving US foreign policy surely predates 1989, and the Cold War saw dozens of US excesses—in Vietnam, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Iran, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and elsewhere. After the Cold War, meanwhile, the United States did embark on selected cases of humanitarian intervention, but it also slashed its defense budgets and shunned as many interventions as it embraced. As Brands, Feaver, and Inboden argue, it is easy to catalogue a list of Cold War failures—the “loss of China, the end of a nuclear monopoly, the erection of the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall, a bloody stalemate in Korea, a communist takeover in Cuba,” and the Vietnam War followed by “the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, an energy crisis and OPEC oil embargo, anti-American revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua, a bungled intervention in Lebanon, dirty wars in Central America, the Iran-*contra* scandal, and the Tiananmen Square massacre.” In the meantime, much went right after the Cold War that could have gone very wrong, from the unification of Germany to the calm reintegration of much of the Warsaw Pact into the West.⁶⁰

The essential principles of post-World War II US foreign policy—global engagement; building a network of friends and allies linked by values, norms, and institutions; underwriting and promoting an open world economy; sustaining a potent and forward-deployed military; tempering regional instability through security provisions; and responding (sometimes to excess) to specific security threats—remained consistent during and after the Cold War. Surely, absent the Soviet threat, the degree of effort could be scaled back, and it was. But if these basic principles made sense during the Cold War, it is hard to see how they became fundamentally invalid—and indeed actively malign—afterward.

Assigning Blame

The literature on restraint paints US foreign policy as a failure in part because it believes the pursuit of primacy and liberal hegemony have *caused* many of the problems the United States now confronts. This argument is sometimes true; Russia’s angry response to NATO expansion may be the leading example. Yet strangely, for a group of mostly realist international relations scholars, restraint proponents give little credence to the malign intentions of some of the countries and groups whose

aggressive and hostile actions have sparked some of the allegedly hegemonic US reactions. Much is blamed on a US foreign policy that actively seeks out enemies and shuns the potential for accommodation. Stephen Wertheim calls for the United States to “shed unnecessary nemeses” such as North Korea,⁶¹ and Stephen Walt contends that restraint-oriented strategies “would have responded more sensibly to Iran’s repeated efforts” to pursue *détente*. “Instead of treating others as pariahs,” he argues, advocates of restraint want to “keep the lines of communication open to everyone.”⁶²

Yet communication cannot resolve incompatible goals. Some countries do aim to undermine US interests or harbor ambitions that threaten stability. North Korea is not a nemesis the United States can “shed” unless it is willing to abandon nonproliferation norms and risk permitting military action against South Korea. Iran’s offers of better relations have been highly conditional and never reflected the consensus opinion of its regime, whose ideology remains grounded in an aggressive anti-Americanism. Washington cannot simply decide to get along with such actors; the trick is to avoid unnecessary provocations while opposing and deterring truly unacceptable behavior. Washington has sometimes gotten that balance wrong, exaggerating threats and overlooking alternatives to military action. But no easy alternative exists in which the United States simply walks back its global presence and “keeps the lines of communication open” with hostile and revisionist regimes.

Restraint’s Prescriptive Problem: An Inconsistent Agenda

The literature on restraint’s diagnosis of the ills of US foreign policy thus suffers from a tendency to impose caricatures on a far more complex reality of attitudes and behavior. These same limitations undermine its efforts to provide a coherent alternative to current US policy.

There is no clear or consistent idea of what restraint means.

The challenge with heeding the call for restraint begins with the fact that there is no clear or consistent idea of what it means. Many essays use the terms “restraint” and “retrenchment” without explaining them or the distinction between them. When authors do venture definitions, they tend to be abstract, referring to generic calls to slash foreign commitments and defense spending.⁶³

Clearly, advocates of restraint believe the United States does too much abroad, especially in its post-1989 liberal interventions—but the precise reasons why, and just how far the retrenchment ought to go, run a wide gamut in the literature.⁶⁴

Some are more ambitious in their proposed cuts, aiming in the words of one essay at “the disengagement of America’s military forces from the world” in a “modern form of isolationism.”⁶⁵ Others suggest an important continuing global role for US power—sometimes offered as an explicit strategy of “offshore balancing”—and are willing to endorse significant military expenditures and posture to achieve it.⁶⁶

Pinning Down the Restraint Agenda

The difficulties of pinning down what this mix of ideas would mean in practice are illustrated in a recent essay by Stephen Walt. “What restrainers oppose,” he wrote, “is military commitments that do not enhance US security; efforts at regime change, social engineering, and nation-building in far-flung lands of little strategic importance; a tendency to issue ultimatums instead of looking for creative compromises; and the bloated military budgets that an unrealistic foreign policy requires and that rob the country of the resources it needs to maintain prosperity and preparedness at home in the United States.”⁶⁷

What is interesting is how much work the modifiers are doing in those lines, but they only beg further questions. Just which military interventions “do not enhance U.S. security”? Which areas are “of little strategic importance”? What is an “unrealistic” goal, and how big does a defense budget have to become before it is “bloated”? This same adjectival approach to analysis crops up again and again in the restraint literature.⁶⁸

US foreign policy choices are all about answering these painfully difficult questions in specific cases, always with imperfect information and hemmed in by powerful constraints. Is a proposed effort to unseat Saddam “unrealistic”? Is Korea “of little strategic importance”? Is a US\$600 billion defense budget “bloated”—and even if it is, how much political arm-twisting would be required to impose major cuts? An additional challenge for policy makers, of course, is that answers that seem obvious in retrospect are maddeningly obscure when a decision must be made. There is no simple alternative in which US foreign policy settings are all set to “restraint” and particular choices become obvious. This complexity is nicely illustrated by the details of many proposals for restraint, which offer sometimes starkly different answers to such individual choices.

Some leading members of this school, for example, urge an effective end to the NATO alliance⁶⁹ whereas others propose gradual troop withdrawals with some conditions.⁷⁰ Some argue that the US “forward presence in Asia has lost its Cold War security rationale” and recommend an end to alliances with Japan and South Korea⁷¹ or a vaguely-defined “reduction in U.S. forward deployments” in the region;⁷² others, as we will shortly see, worry about the rising threat from

China and exclude Asia from their restraint agenda. Some advocates appear to propose immediately abandoning the Middle East;⁷³ others highlight the region as the exception to a global policy of retrenchment.⁷⁴ Some suggest that “terrorism should still elicit a strong response,”⁷⁵ without specifying what US engagement this would demand. Such a response would appear to call for efforts to develop partner capabilities and conduct limited counterterrorism operations with a minimal footprint—but this is exactly the sort of posture the United States has now adopted in Iraq.⁷⁶

Critically, most restrainers appear to agree that the United States could not sit idly by if a hostile Russia invaded Europe, if China began waging wars against its neighbors, or if Iran undertook large-scale attacks.⁷⁷ Given the nature of US global interests, this concession is unavoidable, but it fatally complicates the coherence of any agenda for restraint: if the United States must be ready to fight such distant, short-notice regional wars, then it is not clear just how much its defense budget can be cut or its global posture eviscerated.⁷⁸ Advocates of restraint often imply that reducing forward posture in and of itself will dramatically ease US defense burdens. But they misperceive the origins of US defense requirements, which flow from the contingencies that the United States decides it must be willing to fight (and how it plans to fight them). Withdrawing US forces from abroad will not change that essential equation.⁷⁹ It could create new burdens, in fact, in two ways: by demanding added investments in power-projection capabilities to make up for the forces that are withdrawn, and by risking the truly enormous costs of major wars if US restraint invites new aggression.

Hemmed in by such constraints on one issue after another, proponents of restraint usually end up advocating only partial or half-way disengagement in specific regions or on particular issues. Stephen Wertheim, even while calling for a dramatic pullback from the Middle East, still suggests that “Washington should of course try to broker the best possible settlements to the conflicts” in Syria and Iraq and “should continue to provide assistance to the Afghan and Iraqi governments.”⁸⁰

But such responsibilities would appear to be precisely what restraint advocates are trying to escape. Barry Posen argues that the United States must still secure the global “commons,” and he favors a potent maritime strategy to do so⁸¹—an ambitious goal that would keep the United States embroiled in regional maritime disputes such as those in the South China Sea. Even on the issue of humanitarian interventions, CATO Institute analysts Trevor Thrall and Benjamin Friedman contend that proponents of restraint “do not wholly reject them. ... [I]f the danger to the people is high and the difficulty of intervention low, it is morally justified.”⁸² A better shorthand summary of the argument made by advocates of the intervention in Libya could hardly be imagined.

These halfway approaches rely in part on a questionable notion that the United States can disengage from the world or significant parts of it, undertake a more distant and conditional set of commitments, and if wars loom, decide *then* if it will respond. But vague, halfway commitments are the worst kind of all.⁸³ They tempt potential aggressors to act and allow situations to collapse into instability in cases where US national interests will not allow America to remain aloof. The United States will then have to go in and clean up the mess at far greater cost than if it had remained engaged in the first place.

Vague, halfway commitments are the worst kind of all.

Such an outcome would ruin the restraint proponents' hope of limiting costs, because the truly crippling expenses of US foreign policy emerge in wars, not annual defense budgets. If a major new regional conflict matched the combined costs of the lower-intensity Afghan and Iraq campaigns, for example (direct costs of between US\$1 trillion and US\$1.5 trillion and indirect costs, such as long-term veteran care, roughly double that⁸⁴), a restraint agenda that cut US defense spending by US\$100 billion a year would take over a quarter century to equal the savings of avoiding a single war.

This danger is far from theoretical: US detachment from Korea and Kuwait helped to tempt major aggression in 1950 and 1990. Restraint advocates scoff at the risk of war absent a US balancer and express confidence that other factors—such as nuclear deterrence and expanded defense efforts by others—will fill the vacuum of power left by US retrenchment.⁸⁵ Even if this reasoning is true to a degree, such a policy would represent a tremendous gamble, one that *might* be justified if the only alternative were a militarized form of primacy. But US policy never conformed to that caricature, and the United States has many options short of full-scale restraint to temper the risks and costs of global engagement.

Dealing with the China Challenge

These dilemmas show up most of all in the way in which some restraint proponents handle the issue of China. Given Chinese regional ambitions, predatory behavior, and coercion of its neighbors, there is a strong argument that the United States cannot pull back—militarily or otherwise—and effectively compete. The problem is especially acute in Asia because of the likely effect of China's overwhelming power on the calculations of others: countries in the region are urgently looking for evidence of credible US commitments. Without that evidence, many could end up deciding that they have no alternative but to appease, rather than balance, Chinese demands.

Despite these concerns, some restraint proponents remain willing to include Asia in their retrenchment agenda. Yet, many leading advocates of restraint disagree and accept that deterring China must be a major exception to the general principle of retrenchment. Mearsheimer and Walt, for example, note that China “is likely to seek hegemony in Asia,” that local powers are too dispersed and weak to offer an effective counter, and that the United States will therefore have to “throw its considerable weight behind” a balancing effort.⁸⁶ Andrew Bacevich appears to agree.⁸⁷

China blows a massive hole in the case for restraint.

This admission is welcome—but it blows a massive hole in the case for restraint. A serious US effort to contest Chinese hegemony will demand significant and growing regional presence in an operationally demanding theater. It will likely require continued US troop deployments in Japan and Korea, deep

engagement including extensive security cooperation activities with regional partners, and major financial commitments to counter Chinese economic statecraft. In sum, if the United States intends to balance Chinese power, it is not clear how restrained it will be able to be. The global outline of restraint would begin to look not unlike a supercharged version of the “rebalance to Asia” announced by the Obama administration, with reduced posture in the Middle East and Europe but a renewed commitment to the Indo-Pacific region. If that is all restraint amounts to in the most geopolitically significant region in the world, it would not imply much of a change.

The dilemmas the China case creates for the restraint agenda come out clearly in Posen’s analysis. He suggests that, in theory, retrenchment in Asia might work out fine—but “out of an abundance of caution . . . the United States ought not to run this experiment.” In Asia, he concludes, “the locals may need the United States, and the United States may need the locals.” Washington should, therefore, play a balancing role to prevent Chinese regional hegemony.⁸⁸

But somehow, Posen then goes on to suggest that the United States should sever its two major alliances in Northeast Asia—with Japan and Korea—without, it seems, entirely distancing itself from their security. He would “renegotiate” the US-Japan treaty and shift the “responsibility” for defense in Korea to Seoul, slashing US force levels in both places.⁸⁹ He does not suggest, though, that the United States could stand by if China or North Korea were to threaten either country. If Washington is committed to regional balancing as he implies, it surely could not, and presumably this is what Posen has in mind by the “locals may need the United States.” But if the United States would still come to their rescue, why abrogate the security treaties and tempt China and North Korea to think they could get away with aggression in the first place? Along the

way, Posen makes a general reference to “going slow” on disengagement from Asia;⁹⁰ but if China’s power is rising, not falling, US investments in the region will be on precisely the opposite trajectory.

China’s leading tools for achieving regional hegemony make this dilemma even more acute. Beijing aims to pursue its goals, not through expansionist wars, but via a gradual process of incremental territorial claims, direct coercion, region-wide economic statecraft, influence-seeking in specific societies, and an increasingly muscular information campaign.⁹¹ US detachment from Asia would clear the way for Beijing to succeed through these “gray zone” techniques, both by thinning out the direct physical barriers to China’s tactics and by weakening the resolve of countries ensnared in these thickening webs of Chinese power. In a strategic competition dominated by activities below the threshold of major conflict, to be missing from a region is to be absent from the competition. Competing and balancing effectively demands persistent engagement of the sort that restraint would largely forfeit.

Toward Discriminate Leadership: Understanding the Real Sources of Overextension

Proponents of restraint have rightfully highlighted the costs the United States has paid—geopolitical, social, political, and financial—for the more extreme and unnecessary adventures it has undertaken in the post-war era. But the accompanying claim that US foreign policy is fundamentally bankrupt and counterproductive is unfounded, and the necessary constraints on US ambitions can be achieved by reforms that stop well short of abandoning alliances or withdrawing from the world. The United States can get just about all the benefit of restraint without the most intense dangers.⁹²

Such an alternative would begin from the presumption that US foreign policy since 1945 has been largely a success, not a failure. It would be based on the assumption that most current US defense commitments—or a significantly smaller but still potent defense budget in the range of US\$550 billion—are sustainable even in the medium-term wake of the current pandemic crisis. Such an alternative vision would be grounded in a firm appreciation for US global leadership, a strong but tempered belief in the need to compete with a rising China, and a faith that the United States and its foreign policy community can exercise these roles with greater discrimination and restraint. It would seek to tame US ambitions, not emasculate them.

Discriminate US leadership can get just about all the benefit of restraint without the most intense dangers.

A shift toward a more regulated form of US global leadership would begin with an obvious step: an embargo on long-term counterinsurgency campaigns and nation-building adventures.⁹³ Despite the charges of some restraint advocates, humanitarian interventions and regime-change operations are not central to the logic of US global engagement—and they never have been.⁹⁴ A second critical limit would be an end to NATO enlargement, which continues to generate new commitments and additional hostility in Russia.

More broadly, the United States could temper the demands on its commitments by pursuing regional geopolitical accommodations. The most likely route to a new round of unnecessary interventions and extreme threat perceptions is not a new bout of nation-building adventures—it is a situation in which rivalries with Russia and China spin out of control, tempt the United States into expensive contests in locations of secondary interest, and increase the risk of war.⁹⁵ Avoiding that outcome demands a new round of diplomacy aiming in part at new regional accommodations where they are possible.

Given Chinese ambitions, such a solution may not be in the cards for Asia, but recent proposals have suggested the outlines of a Eurasian accord that could soften the rivalry with Russia.⁹⁶ In Korea, as well, new concepts of a “peace regime” could include conventional arms control and confidence-building measures, reducing the potential for offensive military action on the Peninsula.⁹⁷ And a return to the JCPOA with Iran would represent an important limit to US ambitions and the basis of a partial accommodation with Tehran.

The sometimes-arcane assumptions and guidance governing US defense planning have been an important engine of global posture and defense spending. The United States could address this problem with more defensive and inherently restrained operational concepts⁹⁸ and by further relaxing the requirement to fight multiple wars at the same time.⁹⁹ It could bolster its nonmilitary instruments of power to provide more potent alternatives to military force. Finally, a humbler US foreign and security policy could scale back plans for nuclear modernization and recommit to major arms control accords, saving tens of billions and preserving important sources of predictability in major power relations. (The Congressional Budget Office estimates that US nuclear modernization plans would cost US\$494 billion between 2019 and 2028 alone.¹⁰⁰)

These steps together would place important guardrails around US foreign and security policy. They would ease the truly excessive components of US ambitions without undermining key elements of US global leadership and deterrent power—and would thus pose less of a risk of triggering the kinds of wars that are the real threats to the sustainability of the US national security posture. They would represent the right answer to the challenge posed by the restraint literature: not to forfeit the US global role, but merely to impose greater discipline upon it.

In a broader sense, the literature on restraint also illustrates the limits of international relations theory to inform actual foreign policy choices. Theory, almost

by definition, deals in generic, encompassing models and ideal types—concepts like realism, liberalism, primacy, and restraint that abridge the actual views of policymakers and the reasons for national behavior in order to simplify the world for the purpose of theory-building. Such archetypal models may have some utility in understanding world politics, but when translated to real cases, they will never capture the full scope of the motives that guide action; they risk descending into caricatures that generate invalid diagnoses and policy agendas that struggle to deal with the tension between conceptual purity and the demands of the real world. This limitation may be one reason for the limited use national security policymakers have for theory: they simply do not see themselves, their actual views, or the maddening and issue-specific complexity of factors that determine policy outcomes reflected in these archetypal concepts.

US foreign policy does not represent the embodiment of a militaristic search for primacy or a limitless commitment to forcing liberal values on a recalcitrant world. It is not the product of a self-interested and homogenous elite, and its record is not one of abject failure. The way forward for the United States is to remain globally engaged in more discriminate and disciplined ways and combine the benefits of such leadership with a decisive move to address pressing domestic issues as well as globally shared ones such as pandemics and climate change. Restraint and retrenchment are not the correct prescriptions for solving our problems.

Notes

1. Daniel W. Drezner, “Charles Koch and George Soros Teamed Up on a New Foreign Policy Think Tank. I Have Questions,” *Washington Post*, July 11, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/07/11/some-questions-about-quincy-institute/>.
2. Michael J. Mazarr, “The Risks of Ignoring Strategic Insolvency,” *Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 7–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2012.725020>.
3. Samuel Moyn, “The Road to Hell,” *American Affairs* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2020), 153, <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2020/02/the-road-to-hell/>.
4. A. Trevor Thrall and Benjamin H. Friedman, “National Interests, Grand Strategy, and the Case for Restraint,” in Thrall and Friedman, eds, *U.S. Grand Strategy in the 21st Century: The Case for Restraint* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 2.
5. Benjamin H. Friedman and Justin Logan, “Why Washington Doesn’t Debate Grand Strategy,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (Winter 2016), 14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26271526>.
6. Stephen Wertheim, “The Price of Primacy: Why America Shouldn’t Dominate the World,” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 2 (March–April 2020), 19, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-02-10/price-primacy>; Jennifer Lind and Daryl G. Press, “Reality Check: American Power in an Age of Constraints,” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 2 (March–April 2020), 48, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-02-10/reality-check>.

7. Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 5, 53.
8. Jon Western, "Sources of Humanitarian Intervention: Beliefs, Information, and Advocacy in the U.S. Decisions on Somalia and Bosnia," *International Security* 26, no. 4 (2002), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092104>; Mikael Blomdahl, "Interacting Interests: Explaining President Obama's Libyan Decision," *European Journal of American Studies* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2018), <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/13224>; Jo Becker and Scott Shane, "Hillary Clinton, 'Smart Power' and a Dictator's Fall," *New York Times*, February 27, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/hillary-clinton-libya.html>.
9. Steven Heydemann, "Why the United States Hasn't Intervened in Syria," *Brookings*, March 17, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/03/17/why-the-united-states-hasnt-intervened-in-syria/>.
10. Hal Brands, Peter Feaver, and William Inboden, "In Defense of the Blob: America's Foreign Policy Establishment Is the Solution, Not the Problem," *Foreign Affairs*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-29/defense-blob>.
11. Scott Straus, "Darfur and the Genocide Debate," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 1 (January–February 2005), 123–33, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20034212?seq=1>.
12. Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004).
13. Alynna J. Lyon and Chris J. Dolan. "American Humanitarian Intervention: Toward a Theory of Coevolution," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 3, no. 1 (2007): 46–78, www.jstor.org/stable/24907220.
14. Michael Beschloss, ed., *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).
15. Frank Hoffman, "A Second Look at the Powell Doctrine," *War on the Rocks*, February 20, 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/02/a-second-look-at-the-powell-doctrine/>.
16. Thom Shanker, "Warning against Wars Like Iraq and Afghanistan," *New York Times*, February 25, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/26/world/26gates.html>.
17. Wertheim, "The Price of Primacy," 26.
18. Michael J. Mazarr, "The Long Road to Pyongyang," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 5 (September/October 2007), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2007-09-01/long-road-pyongyang>.
19. Arman Grigoryan, "Selective Wilsonianism: Material Interests and the West's Support for Democracy," *International Security* 44, no. 4 (Spring 2020), 158, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00378.
20. US European Command, "U.S. Military Presence in Europe, 1945–2016: Historical View," May 16, 2016, <https://www.eucom.mil/doc/35220/u-s-forces-in-europe>; Tim Kane, *Global U.S. Troop Deployment, 1950–2003* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, May 24, 2006), <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/global-us-troop-deployment-1950-2003>; Emma Chanlett Avery and Ian Rinehart, *The U.S. Military Presence in Okinawa and the Futenma Base Controversy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 20, 2016), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42645.pdf>.
21. Kristen Bialik, "U.S. Active-Duty Military Presence Overseas is at its Smallest in Decades," Pew Research Center, August 22, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/22/u-s-active-duty-military-presence-overseas-is-at-its-smallest-in-decades/>.
22. Emma Ashford, "Unbalanced: Rethinking America's Commitment to the Middle East," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2018), 129; <https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/articles/ashford-ssq-november-2018.pdf>.

23. Congressional Research Service, “The 2019-2020 Iran Crisis and U.S. Military Deployments,” January 9, 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11403>.
24. Heidi M. Peters and Sofia Plagakis, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007–2018* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, updated May 10, 2019), 12–13, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44116.pdf>.
25. Dinah Walker, *Trends in U.S. Military Spending* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, July 15, 2014), <https://www.cfr.org/report/trends-us-military-spending>; Bacevich, *The Age of Illusions*, 66.
26. World Bank, “Military Expenditure, % of GDP—United States,” accessed April 29, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=US>.
27. Anthony H. Cordesman, “Defense Spending and the New CBO Budget Projections for FY2020–FY2029,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 22, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/defense-spending-and-new-cbo-budget-projections-fy2020-fy2029>.
28. Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation, “Fact Sheet: U.S. Nuclear Weapons Total Inventory,” accessed May 1, 2020, <https://armscontrolcenter.org/factsheet-u-s-nuclear-weapons-total-inventory/>
29. John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 104, 123, loc. 2288, 2958, 3167, Kindle.
30. Stephen M. Walt, “There’s No Such Thing as Good Liberal Hegemony,” *Foreign Policy*, April 21, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/21/theres-no-such-thing-as-good-liberal-hegemony/>.
31. Jonathan Rauch, “Why Bush (Senior) Didn’t Blow It in the Gulf War,” *The Atlantic*, October 1, 2001, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2001/10/why-bush-senior-didnt-blow-it-in-the-gulf-war/377568/>.
32. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, loc 36, Kindle.
33. Michael J. Mazarr, *Leap of Faith: Hubris, Negligence, and America’s Greatest Foreign Policy Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018), chaps. 2, 3.
34. Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case Against Retrenchment,” *International Security* 37, no. 3 (Winter 2012–2013), 31–32, https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/10.1162/ISEC_a_00107.
35. Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, October 16, 2018), 95, 15; Walt, “In the National Interest: A New Grand Strategy for American Foreign Policy,” *Boston Review* 30, no. 1 (February–March 2005), <http://bostonreview.net/walt-national-interest>; John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 2445–70; Friedman and Logan, “Why Washington Doesn’t Debate Grand Strategy.”
36. Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), 81, 95.
37. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, 77, 81.
38. Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Age of Illusions: How America Squandered Its Cold War Victory* (New York: Henry Holt, 2020), 65.
39. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, 103; Bacevich, *The Age of Illusions*, 30.
40. Brands, Feaver, and Inboden, “In Defense of the Blob”; see also Robert Jervis, “Liberalism, the Blob, and American Foreign Policy: Evidence and Methodology,” *Security Studies* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2020.1761440>.
41. Bob Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).

42. John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July–August 2016), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing>.
43. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 21–52, 7.
44. Wertheim, "The Price of Primacy," 19.
45. Posen, *Restraint*, 24.
46. Bacevich, *The Age of Illusions*, 5.
47. John Gerard Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order," *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (1982), http://ftp.columbia.edu/itc/sipa/U6800/readings-sm/rug_ocr.pdf, accessed May 1, 2020.
48. G. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, "Socialization and Hegemonic Power," *International Organization*, 44, no. 3 (Summer 1990), 303, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081830003530X>.
49. Bentley B. Allan, Srdjan Vucetic and Ted Hopf, "The Distribution of Identity and the Future of International Order: China's Hegemonic Prospects," *International Organization* 72, no. 4 (Fall 2018), 839–69, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818318000267>.
50. Brendan Rittenhouse Green, "Primacy and Proliferation," in Thrall and Friedman, eds., *U.S. Grand Strategy in the 21st Century*.
51. Nicholas Miller, *Stopping the Bomb: The Sources and Effectiveness of US Nonproliferation Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).
52. World Bank, "GDP (Constant 2010 US\$)," accessed April 29, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD>; World Bank, "GDP per Capita (Constant 2010 US\$)," accessed April 29, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD>.
53. Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, *Global Extreme Poverty* (Our World in Data, 2013, revised 2019), <https://ourworldindata.org/extreme-poverty>; "Decline of Global Extreme Poverty Continues but Has Slowed: World Bank," World Bank, September 19, 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/09/19/decline-of-global-extreme-poverty-continues-but-has-slowed-world-bank>; Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2018).
54. Thomas S. Szayna et al., *What Are the Trends in Armed Conflicts, and What Do They Mean for U.S. Defense Policy?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).
55. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 52.
56. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 8.
57. Eugene Gholtz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security* 21, no. 4 (Spring 1997), 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539282>; Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, 174–75; Bacevich, *The Age of Illusions*, 60, 80–81; John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, 4172–99.
58. Andrew J. Bacevich, "Ending Endless War: A Pragmatic Military Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 5 (September/October 2016), 36, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-08-03/ending-endless-war>; Bacevich, *The Age of Illusions*, 37.
59. Posen, *Restraint*, 87.
60. Brands, Feaver, and Inboden, "In Defense of the Blob."
61. Wertheim, "The Price of Primacy."
62. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 267, 273.

63. Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment," *International Security* 35, no. 4 (Spring 2011), 11, 41.
64. Kathleen H. Hicks and Joseph P. Federici, *Getting to Less? Exploring the Press for Less in America's Defense Commitments* (Washington, DC: CSIS, January 2020), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/getting-less-exploring-press-less-america-defense-commitments>.
65. Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," 5; see also Thrall and Friedman, "National Interests, Grand Strategy, and the Case for Restraint," 5.
66. Mearsheimer and Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing"; Posen, *Restraint*.
67. Stephen M. Walt, "The United States Can Still Win the Coronavirus Pandemic," *Foreign Policy*, April 3, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/03/united-states-can-still-win-coronavirus-pandemic-power/>.
68. Thrall and Friedman, "National Interests, Grand Strategy, and the Case for Restraint," 1.
69. Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," 17–18; Benjamin H. Friedman and Christopher Preble, "Budgetary Savings from Military Restraint," CATO Institute, September 23, 2010, 5, <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/budgetary-savings-military-restraint>; Bachevich, "Ending Endless War," 43.
70. Posen, *Restraint*, 90.
71. Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," 20.
72. Joseph M. Parent and Paul K. MacDonald, "The Wisdom of Retrenchment: America Must Cut Back to Move Forward," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 6 (November 2011), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2011-10-14/wisdom-retrenchment>.
73. Harvey M. Sapolsky, et al., "Restraining Order: For Strategic Modesty," *World Affairs* 172, no. 2 (Fall 2009), 88–91.
74. Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," 25–30.
75. Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," 6.
76. Ben Connable, *An Enduring American Presence in Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020).
77. Mearsheimer and Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing."
78. Benjamin H. Friedman and Justin Logan, "Why the U.S. Military Budget Is 'Foolish and Sustainable,'" *Orbis* 56, no. 2 (Spring 2012), <https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/articles/logan-friedman-obis-spring-2012.pdf>; Logan Friedman and Brendan Rittenhouse Green, "Correspondence: Debating American Engagement," *International Security* 38, no. 2 (Fall 2013), 189, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_c_00140; Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America," 193.
79. Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America," 16–17.
80. Wertheim, "The Price of Primacy," 25.
81. Posen, *Restraint*, 135–39.
82. Thrall and Friedman, "National Interests, Grand Strategy, and the Case for Restraint," 7.
83. Sebastian Rosato and John Schuessler, "A Realist Foreign Policy for the United States," *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 4 (December 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592711003963>.
84. Stephen Daggett, *Costs of Major U.S. Wars* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 29, 2010), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS22926.pdf>; Neta C. Crawford, *United States Budgetary Costs and Obligations of Post-9/11 Wars through FY2020: \$6.4 Trillion* (Providence, RI: Brown University Watson Institute, November 29, 2019), <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2019/US%20Budgetary%20Costs%20of%20Wars%20November%202019.pdf>.

85. Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," 31; Parent and MacDonald, "The Wisdom of Retrenchment"; Thrall and Friedman, "National Interests, Grand Strategy, and the Case for Restraint," 6.
86. Mearsheimer and Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing"; Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 269.
87. Bacevich, "Ending Endless War," 43.
88. Posen, *Restraint*, 95–96.
89. Posen, *Restraint*, 100, 105.
90. Posen, *Restraint*, 101.
91. Lyle J. Morris, et al, *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression below the Threshold of Major War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019); https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2942.html.
92. Michael J. Mazarr and the NDU Strategy Study Group, *Discriminate Power: A Strategy for a Sustainable National Security Posture* (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, The Philadelphia Papers no. 2, May 2013), https://www.fpri.org/docs/Discriminate_Power_Mazarr_et_al.pdf; Michael J. Mazarr, "A Strategy of Discriminate Power: A Global Posture for Sustained Leadership," *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.893179>; Jennifer Lind and William C. Wohlforth, "The Future of the Liberal Order is Conservative: A Strategy to Save the System," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 2 (March–April 2019), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-02-12/future-liberal-order-conservative>.
93. Michael J. Mazarr, "The Folly of Asymmetric War," *Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (Summer 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1162/wash.2008.31.3.33>; Mazarr, "The Rise and Fall of the Failed State Paradigm," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 1 (January–February 2014), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2013-12-06/rise-and-fall-failed-state-paradigm>.
94. Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, "Correspondence," 193.
95. Michael J. Mazarr and Michael Kofman, "Rediscovering Statecraft in a Changing Post-War Order," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (May 2018), 104; see also Mark Galeotti, "The Gerasimov Doctrine," *Berlin Policy Journal*, April 28, 2020, <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/the-gerasimov-doctrine/>.
96. Samuel Charap et al., eds., *A Consensus Proposal for a Revised Regional Order in Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), https://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF410.html.
97. Gian Gentile and Michael Mazarr, "The Hidden Components of the North Korean Military Challenge," *National Interest*, March 12, 2019, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2019/03/the-hidden-components-of-the-north-korean-military.html>.
98. Eugene Gholz, Benjamin Friedman, and Enea Gjoza, "Defensive Defense: A Better Way to Protect U.S. Allies in Asia," *Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1693103>.
99. Jim Mitre, "A Eulogy for the Two-War Construct," *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1557479>.
100. Michael Bennett et al., *Projected Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2019 to 2028* (Washington, DC: Congressional Budget Office, January 24, 2019), <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/54914>.