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**Restraint**  
*Recalibrating American Strategy*

By Patrick M. Cronin



Center for a  
New American  
Security

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**Cover Image**  
The Statue of Liberty.

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# Restraint

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## *About the Authors*

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A close-up, low-angle shot of the Statue of Liberty's head and crown, rendered in a monochromatic blue color scheme. The image is used as a background for the title and author information.

RESTRAINT  
RECALIBRATING AMERICAN STRATEGY

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## I. INTRODUCTION

By Patrick M. Cronin

The United States needs a sustainable and strategic approach to foreign and defense policy that recognizes the deepening mismatch between ends and means. Driven by a realist impulse to be the global enforcer and a moral imperative to act as global savior, the United States remains disproportionately invested in managing international security relative to its limited resources. While the United States stands to remain the world's preeminent power for some time, the era of boundless commitment and profligacy has passed. To ignore this reality could precipitate decline rather than perpetuate preponderance. While the United States is right to focus on building the capacity of partners, rising power centers are unlikely to contribute much more to a liberal world order based on our democratic and free-market principles. In the absence of others to shoulder greater responsibilities, and faced with a shifting and complex global environment, America is likely to encounter heavier security burdens, not lighter ones. Yet those security investments may well yield diminishing returns.

The United States retains broad security interests and a dedication to global progress, but its strained resources should oblige a pragmatic re-examination of how the country pursues its ambitious aims. Failure to kick our hyper-power habit could generate U.S. decline and hasten the rise of unwelcome competitors. America can reverse this process, but only by confronting difficult choices at home and abroad. American leadership in the world remains essential, positive and coveted by our allies, but our top priority must be to realign our ambitions and our resources to build a solid foundation for the future. America's long-term influence is being eroded by having to spend an ever-larger percentage of its capital and legitimacy managing short-term financial and military crises. If the United States fails to get its economic house in order, by the end of this decade it may well be carrying a federal debt close to 100 percent

of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Preeminence built on debt and military power is unsustainable. Budgetary constraints will require accepting less military dominance than America has enjoyed, especially since the end of the Cold War. Even with relatively flat defense budgets, we will be buying fewer ships and aircraft and, with pressure to reduce defense spending in real terms, even further reductions are possible. But less military dominance does not have to equate to less security for the nation. In the future, we should be as concerned about our economic vulnerabilities as we are about the vulnerabilities arising from failing states and traditional military threats.

This paper calls for a recalibration of American strategy. It first reflects on the significant, if largely self-imposed, pressures that push the United States toward wider and deeper commitments. It then examines international trends that are gradually giving rise to new centers of power, especially across Asia. While the United States jeopardizes its long-term economic health to extend its role in stabilizing current hot spots, emerging Asian powers are focused on their own national economic strategies, technological prowess and human capacity. Finally, this paper considers the implications of America's diminishing resources and increasing commitments, and considers fundamental ways in which America can adapt to retain global influence. President Barack Obama has talked about recalibrating America's role but if anything, his actions have widened the chasm between ends and means. Deploying additional troops overseas, expanding diplomacy and development, significant deficit spending and expanding drone attacks on terrorist leaders around the globe – all these hardly speak to the notion of restraint. Far more adaptation and frugality will be required in the coming years than has thus far been suggested by these actions, however individually worthy. Traditional allies and new partners should be encouraged to pick up new responsibilities, but many are likely

to disappoint; even when they are driven to action they are apt to have divergent interests. Meanwhile, the difficulty of avoiding runaway deficits will probably mean that defense spending will not only have to stop rising but have to be reduced; reforms and other savings can cover some but probably not all of needed cuts in the next decade.

At the end of the day, the best way forward will be to think harder before reacting and committing our finite resources, to look for asymmetric responses – those with low costs and high returns – rather than those that deliver high returns at an equally high cost and to get our own house in order. This approach may not seem as gratifying as declaring our determination to remain number one and to be militarily dominant in perpetuity. But such a narrow and myopic view of power and security in the 21st century would, in all probability, only hasten an unnecessary decline. Paradoxically, the United States can best pursue a protracted period of global order by resisting the temptation to solve all the world's problems. The United States must pursue a strategy characterized by, in a word, restraint. Restraint is not a strategy, but it can help the United States preserve its limited means to focus on essential commitments.



## II. TWO HISTORIC IMPULSES

Despite fundamental differences between President Obama and President George W. Bush, the principal influences on U.S. foreign policymaking remain largely unaltered. Two common themes have been impelling an American revisionist foreign policy in the 21st century. The first is the impulse to tamp down all threats, to others and especially to ourselves. The second is a predilection for rebuilding struggling states and protecting human rights abroad. Both of these laudable reflexes – a desire to be global enforcer and global savior – evolved over decades of the 20th century, a period characterized alternately by existential threat and U.S. global primacy. These circumstances no longer exist. Yet these tendencies to serve as enforcer and savior, along with long-term economic trends that are at once increasing America's deficits and causing new centers of power to emerge around the world, are making it virtually impossible for the United States' ability to sustain business as usual. To continue to follow these instincts and spending levels without greater reflection, sense of priorities and understanding of available means, is to invite strategic overstretch, bankruptcy and exhaustion.

### Global Enforcer

There is a longstanding conviction in part of the American body politic that the United States must serve as global policeman and smother all threats. Foreign policy elites on both sides of the aisle appear to share this conviction. Thus, prominent commentator Robert Kagan argues that the United States remains “a martial nation.” It has become “fashionable to argue that the United States has relied too heavily on the military and paid too little attention to diplomacy and the so-called underlying causes of terrorism or other forms of aggression.” But, he concludes, “The events of 2009 have revealed the limits of such facile observations.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, many liberal activists express the need for America to do even more,

particularly with regard to specific issues ranging from climate change to peace in the Middle East. President Obama pragmatically stresses the need to engage partners and allies to help achieve U.S. interests in the world. Nonetheless, the president advocates an ambitious American agenda aimed at designing a new world order:

The international order we seek is one that can resolve the challenges of our times. Countering violent extremism and insurgency; stopping the spread of nuclear weapons and securing nuclear materials; combating a changing climate and sustaining global growth; helping countries feed themselves and care for their sick; preventing conflict and healing its wounds.<sup>2</sup>

Without adopting a policy of isolationism, there is a need to reconsider the ubiquity and magnitude of America's role as the global enforcer. To what extent should the United States be primarily responsible for protracted, low-intensity but high-cost, nation-building by force of arms? How can America resist the allure of being over reliant on military power in the midst of a complex struggle against violent extremism and transnational terrorism? Perhaps most difficult of all, how can the United States unilaterally contain the threats of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction without sowing bigger problems by again resorting to armed intervention?

The global-enforcer impulse can lead deeper into protracted conflicts that promise to be expensive without providing commensurate security gains. In the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, notwithstanding notional timetables for drawing down troops, the United States will have difficulty pulling out because America tends to err on the side of doing more when it comes to security. To be clear, this paper does not advocate a precipitous withdrawal from either Iraq or Afghanistan, but simply argues for a dispassionate reappraisal of the costs and the benefits. Together, these operations have cost well

over a trillion dollars (about 750 billion dollars for Iraq and 300 billion dollars for Afghanistan), making them the second most expensive military campaign in American history after World War II.<sup>3</sup> But what exactly is America “buying” this time? Whereas the terrible costs of World War II placed the United States in a stronger global position, there are few imaginable scenarios that would leave the United States in a better position following the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan (although there are multiple scenarios that might leave us worse off). Were the United States to follow through on its most ambitious state-building dreams in Afghanistan and spend another trillion dollars over the coming decade, would those investments shore up America’s international status and security? It is conceivable that the contrary might be true; the deeper we “succeed” and invest in Iraq and Afghanistan – at least the longer we have to shoulder most of the costs without handing off responsibilities for security and governance – the more severe will be the demands on the treasury. Senior administration officials comprehend both these high costs and the dangers of pulling out irresponsibly; but to recognize that the clock is ticking is not the same as making the tough decisions that are needed now and then selling them to the American people.

Irregular warfare in general and counterinsurgency in particular have their price. The capacity to fight irregular wars and wage counterinsurgency should remain part of the military’s core competencies, and these capabilities need to be institutionalized within the armed forces and across the U.S. government. Even so, there is a risk of over-correcting for past neglect and rebalancing defense capabilities too far in the direction of fighting the current wars. In the present environment, some security analysts warn about insurgency and political violence that are growing or could grow in disparate parts of the world, including, Mexico, Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen and Iran. While

counterinsurgency successes have been noted in recent years, the overall cost-benefit analysis that weighs vital interests and available means, that assesses the risks and the opportunity costs, and that looks at partners on the ground in these hot spots, suggests at least a modicum of caution about staying as deeply engaged in the next decade as we have been in the past decade. And while relying on partners may seem less costly, there are limits to working “by, with and through others.” This approach holds the United States hostage to the capacity and willingness of partners to address specific threats and advance American interests, as well as to behave in a manner consonant with international norms.<sup>4</sup> Partners may fall short on one or all of these metrics.

The global-enforcer temptation also pressures us into an action-overreaction dynamic that is potentially even more costly than the Cold War action-reaction phenomenon. During the bipolar confrontation with the Soviet Union, the United States was structurally driven into a tit-for-tat, action-reaction cycle of competition that ended only when one of the antagonists failed. Today, in a world threatened by transnational terrorist networks that exploit globalization to attack U.S. interests and its homeland, the United States must guard against an unnecessary overreaction to attacks and a fantastical belief that governments can eliminate the element of risk.

Countering terrorism has been a U.S. obsession during the past decade. The tendency to over-react to terrorists’ actions has in part given groups like al Qaeda and its offshoots greater stature in the pantheon of villains than they deserve.<sup>5</sup> The Bush administration organized national security around a “Global War on Terrorism.” While this provided a powerful governmental response to the events of September 11, it also conflated a variety of threats under a single banner. Every local conflict being exploited by transnational radicals threatened to draw the United States into another theater of

the “global insurgency” almost single-handedly. Meanwhile, despite a significant change in rhetoric and a desire to narrow the threat to a manageable size, the Obama administration cannot yet point to specific ways in which it has lowered the costs of combating terrorism. To be sure, the administration has advocated a long-term, potentially less costly means of enlisting local partners to police terrorist sanctuaries. According to John Brennan, assistant to the president for counterterrorism and homeland security, the United States is seeking to strengthen “the capacity of foreign militaries and security forces” and judiciaries, using more foreign aid to fight poverty, and demonstrate the ability of “diplomacy, dialogue, and the democratic process” to solve “seemingly intractable problems.”<sup>6</sup> Surely, this is a sensible policy. Unfortunately, it remains to be seen how capable America’s partners will be in thwarting terrorism, whether in Pakistan, Yemen, the Philippines or elsewhere.

Even failed terrorist attacks, like the attempted Christmas Day attack on an airplane or the botched SUV car bomb left in Times Square, can trigger unhealthy hysteria in the American polity that better serves the interests of the terrorists than it does the quiet, methodical and deliberate work of professionals seeking to strengthen our homeland security. More to the point, pouring more resources into Afghanistan will not address the heart of this transnational terror threat. While Afghanistan is important for other reasons (including the perception of U.S. and NATO credibility), these incidents suggest that Afghanistan is no longer the epicenter of the terrorist threat to the American homeland. Consider the links between the Christmas Day bomber, Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, and Yemeni al Qaeda in the Arabia Peninsula; between American Faisal Shahzad and a group like the Pakistani Taliban (the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan or TTP). The American people would be right to wonder: how are expenditures in Afghanistan buying more

security at home? If this movement can simply morph into new regions and draw in new groups, how can we think that expensive military operations are achieving security? Even if one assumes the war in Afghanistan is necessary for stability in Pakistan, the question remains: What is America’s political strategy for improving security in that country rather than risking increased radicalization and weaker governance?

The penchant for playing the global policeman also comes into play in countering weapons of mass destruction. Some contend that the United States must stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, just as it is up to the United States to compel North Korea to relinquish its nuclear arms.<sup>7</sup> As explored more below, questions remain regarding the possible risk and feasibility of doing so in either case. It is more plausible to imagine that increasing global pressure on proliferators and controlling global nuclear materials could be achieved. The Obama administration deserves considerable credit for focusing its energies on mobilizing the international community to do more about this global challenge, working assiduously to drum up international support for greater collective action – and doing so without forsaking the need to maintain a credible nuclear deterrent. Indeed, it is the ambitious arms-control dimension of the administration’s policy that simultaneously is making it possible to preserve nuclear-modernization programs. To spur greater international cooperation, President Obama orchestrated a Global Nuclear Security Summit in Washington in April. His administration also produced a Nuclear Posture Review that trained U.S. sights on nuclear states that violate international rules.<sup>8</sup> Russia and the United States agreed on nuclear reductions, although they left aside thorny issues like what to do with Cold War-era tactical nuclear weapons. International participants at the nuclear summit in Washington pledged greater cooperation, but implementation is only voluntary. The Nuclear

Non-Proliferation Treaty Review process has been heavily challenged by national interests in many countries. Even though it is unclear how much other countries will contribute to effective solutions, the attempt to galvanize them into collective action is a worthwhile endeavor. The United States cannot single-handedly secure the world.

### **Global Savior**

The global-enforcer mind-set is conjoined by a strong idealistic impulse to play the role of global savior. This second propensity engrained into the American psyche is often manifested in the laudable desires to help develop weak states and guarantee human rights – commendable motivations that speak well of the American people. As President Obama said in the preamble to his National Security Strategy, “Indeed, no nation should be better positioned to lead in an era of globalization than America – the Nation that helped bring globalization about, whose institutions are designed to prepare individuals to succeed in a competitive world, and whose people trace their roots to every country on the face of the Earth. But global needs will always surpass U.S. capacity.” The decade-long realization that security risks can arise from weak and failed states as much or more than from strong states should give way to a new recognition of the limits of American power. Hence, the question is not whether these are worthy aspirations, but rather what are realistic and sustainable means by which the United States can best contribute to them?

Until recently, Washington’s policy toward Burma has encapsulated a global-savior mindset. For years, American policy focused on isolating and sanctioning the military junta that has held power for nearly half a century. Perhaps because Burma did not seem so consequential to U.S. interests, the United States had the leeway to let consideration of human rights dominate its foreign relations. While the United States has stood alone in Asia in seeking to cast Burma as a pariah state, China

has embraced its neighbor in exchange for access and resources. U.S. allies and friends within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Burma is a member, have long advocated a policy of engagement rather than simply sanctions. Successive American governments have chosen to sanction the junta, not least because of its harsh crackdown on its domestic population, especially pro-democracy opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Neither isolation nor engagement has met with success, however, and the Obama administration, spurning the global-savior impulse, has sought to align with ASEAN by engaging Burma.

An alternative policy of limited engagement can still keep a spotlight on human rights without ceding other interests, including forcing Burma into a closer relationship with China and putting the United States at cross purposes with ASEAN. As the Obama administration has calculated, the cost-benefit calculus for engaging Burma remains favorable for further engagement. First, the regime is largely happy to be self-isolated, and sanctions have clearly not affected Burma’s policies. With general elections scheduled to be held in Burma this year, the State Peace and Development Council (as the junta is known) has hardly paved a “road map to democracy.” Second, the regime’s seclusion has given China a free hand, especially with respect to access and bases, arms sales or the acquisition of resources. Third, the celebrated Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has clearly enjoyed more freedom since the new policy of engagement began. Engagement at least retains some hope of altering the regime’s harsh grip on its people, while minimizing some of the risks associated with isolation.

Despite all these reasons for engagement with Burma, the global-savior pressure is apparent in pressure on the Obama administration to cease even its tentative and cautious outreach. In early May, Senator Mitch McConnell, R-KY, supported by Senator Dianne Feinstein, D-CA, called for renewing sanctions against the military regime in



order to protest its “new sham constitution.” “In my view,” said Senator McConnell, “the United States must deny the regime that legitimacy.” He quoted Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell’s linkage of engagement to reforms in Burma that would allow credible elections. With no reform in sight, Senator McConnell wants to close the door to engagement.<sup>9</sup> Thus, while the Senate may have helped open the door to engagement, it is simultaneously hoping to close it. While a broader international audience may draw conclusions about what the United States stands for, the junta will also be judged by the Burmese. As Assistant Secretary Campbell put it during his second visit to the country in May 2010, “Burma cannot move forward while the government itself persists in launching attacks against its own people to force compliance with a proposal its ethnic groups cannot accept. The very stability the regime seeks will continue to be elusive until a peaceable solution can be found through dialogue.”<sup>10</sup>

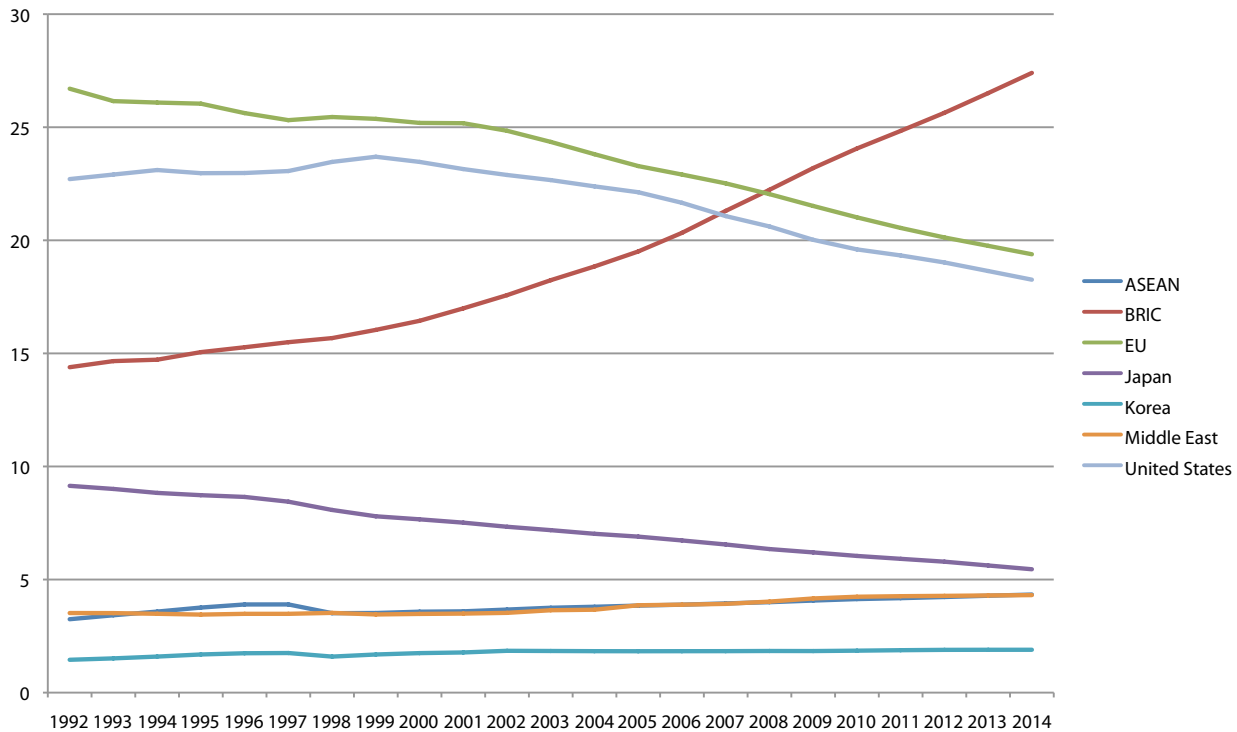
Beyond state-building in the shadow of conflict, as in Afghanistan, the global-savior tendency is bound up in the larger enterprise of development assistance. The administration has yet to make major decisions on this front, but the possible rebirth of an independent U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is an organic outgrowth of this liberal internationalist pressure. USAID is worth rebuilding, and it needs more resources to bolster America’s civilian capacity to advance American interests overseas. But restoration of USAID to anything akin to its halcyon days of the 1960s will require overcoming a series of hurdles including: the myriad and often competing goals of assistance; the related problems of the fragmentation, outsourcing, and earmarking of U.S. development assistance programs; the enduring usefulness of Western development assistance in light of a ‘Beijing consensus’ in which assistance is tied to access to natural resources rather than good policy; and the shortage of new money to

devote to these endeavors. For all these reasons and others, even a USAID on the upswing will have to make tough geographic and policy tradeoffs. It will have to use limited assistance dollars as catalysts and incentives in tandem with other donors and the recipient countries themselves.

The pressure to continue America’s global hegemony – to play enforcer and savior to the world – is taxing America’s increasingly finite resources. Instead of expecting to do more with more, the United States is more likely to have to learn to do less with less. In this respect, the dual convictions to police and save the world speak to a fundamental need to rethink the basis for world order in the 21st century. The United States should remain a leader in acknowledging and responding to global challenges, but it cannot manage all of them.

At the very least, American foreign policy has to change because what we are doing is not working well. Our current approach is resulting in increased influence for dangerous states like Iran and competitors such as China. Americans need balanced pragmatism that avoids extreme outlooks. For most of its history, the United States has been a nation on the ascent. Indeed, in the two decades following its triumph in the Cold War, Americans became over-confident in their ability to unilaterally lead and act. That was a dangerous illusion, and it was shattered on September 11th and in the economic crisis that followed. Now, however, we are developing an equally illusory sense of anxiety, a fear that the nation may be in decline with its best days behind it. But we would be unwise and unfair to leap to delusions of our demise, even while we have to live with risk. What we need is an approach that recalibrates America’s role in the world so that the United States can avoid the pressures of being either global enforcer or global savior and instead protect America’s long-term interests and ability to lead. Others are looking to the long term, even if we are not. As the United States continues to spend more than it

Figure 1: Percentage of World GDP (1992-2014). 2007-2014 data is projected



Source: International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook Database

can afford for short-term security, at the expense of long-term prosperity, potential competitors are building a solid foundation for strength.

The rise of Asian power is emblematic of this global phenomenon, and is bound to influence the international power balance over time. Economic boom makes greater political power possible. According to the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), “The rise of China, the world’s most populous country, and India, the world’s largest democracy, will continue to shape an international system that is no longer easily defined – one in which the United States will remain the most powerful actor but must increasingly work with key allies and partners if it is to sustain stability and peace.”<sup>13</sup> As former editor of *The Economist* and international affairs analyst Bill Emmott adds, “Politics will shape tomorrow’s

Asia, an Asia of great power rivalry, of suspicion and of strategic maneuvering. ...”<sup>14</sup>

Even though America’s economy is projected to retain a larger percentage of global GDP than that of any other country, a decade from now three of the top four economies of the world are expected to be in Asia: those of China, India and Japan. Moreover, whether it is because 2009 brought the world’s worst recession since the Great Depression or the realization that the U.S. stock market could drop 1,000 points in a matter of minutes, there is a pervasive sense that financial volatility will endure. This is why the 2010 Joint Operating Environment identified the major threat to U.S. national security as the nation’s growing debt problem.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the General Accountability Office has warned that under current law the debt-to-GDP ratio will exceed the historical post-World War II record of

### Geoeconomic Trends

Rising power centers are placing new economic pressures on the United States. A globalized economy has precipitated the rise of major new centers of power around the world. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States' share of global GDP has declined, while that of Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC) has increased (see Figure 1). By 2014, BRIC countries will represent more than 27 percent of global GDP, while the United States and the European Union will represent less than 20 percent each.<sup>11</sup> The rise of new economies is not simply in Asia; in fact, in 2006 and 2007, the economies of 124 countries grew at least 4 percent a year.<sup>12</sup>

109 percent by the mid 2030s and under current policy would exceed this mark around 2020. Many experts view any country with a debt of 100 percent of GDP as having reached an ominous tipping point.<sup>16</sup>

President Obama has relied on spending borrowed money to stabilize an economy with 10 percent unemployment. But such pump-priming, while necessary in the short-term, runs contrary to the long-term debt problem. History's largest debtor nation needs to rein in its spending. At the end of the day, U.S. power hinges on its economic foundation. The president understands these realities; whether he and his administration can harness economic and financial forces to produce and sustain U.S. economic resurgence, however, is another matter.

### III. WIELDING LIMITED POWER

The United States faces a dilemma in balancing current security commitments with the need to preserve and enhance its power. Short-term objectives require the United States to use its preeminent power to cope with a range of challenges and threats. But long-term imperatives suggest the need to shore up power in order to better preserve America's influence for decades to come. What are the practical implications of this dilemma for immediate U.S. policy in dealing with some of the largest challenges, including a restive insurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a proliferating Iran, an aggressive North Korea and a rising China?

#### Afghanistan and Pakistan

Despite talk of a renewed focus on diplomacy and development, the administration has escalated military activity in Southwest Asia, where the war in Afghanistan continues unabated. The administration's present strategy appears to be moving cautiously, one step at a time, with the next decision to come after a prospective offensive in the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar. Meanwhile, the stakes in neighboring Pakistan have never been higher. To hear the president and senior officials talk of the current wars, one might imagine that there is a clear political road map out of these deepening conflict zones. As the president proclaimed at the U.S. Military Academy in May, "We will adapt, we will persist, and I have no doubt that together with our Afghan and international partners we will succeed in Afghanistan."<sup>17</sup>

But many commentators are raising serious doubts about whether success is possible and, if it is, how to win the peace in Afghanistan while preserving stability in Pakistan.<sup>18</sup> While paying for the current war is a policy issue and not immediately an economic one, there is an immediate and constant need to continually assess the pros and cons of heavy military engagement. In an era of what is being called persistent engagement, the United

States must grapple with how to balance restraint and activity in order to protect the national interest. To the extent that “armed nation-building” works at all, it is expensive. The United States can ill afford to prosecute the Iraq and Afghan wars in perpetuity. That is why the Obama administration underscores the need to adhere to a timetable to draw down troop levels in Iraq, even though the reduction of U.S. troops risks resurgent civil strife. In Afghanistan, however, President Obama is likely to face a tougher choice about whether it is possible to begin withdrawing troops in mid-to-late 2011, given that he has declared this conflict a “war of necessity.” Even a comprehensive strategy supported by surging development assistance and greater diplomacy and negotiation is unlikely to produce decisive gains in stability in the near term. In some cases, because of the disjointed application of military and other means, development assistance is exacerbating corruption rather than winning hearts and minds.<sup>19</sup> The increase of forces that fought to retake Helmand Province apparently left the majority of locals in Marjah more opposed to NATO forces than had been the case prior to Operation Moshtarak, and Taliban recruitment was seen as likely to rise.<sup>20</sup> Kandahar is seen as the ultimate test case, but the presumption that the local politics will fall our way would mark a departure from historical experience. The administration has said it would decide by the fall of 2010 whether military operations were making political stability sustainable. In the event that things do not pan out, the administration should have a Plan B ready to limit the damage and support new diplomatic efforts to reduce the sacrifices that Americans are making for an effort that will not demonstrably improve U.S. and regional security. The danger is that the United States may, six months at a time, prolong an increasingly costly conflict without a realistic political destination in mind.

America’s brittle partners in Afghanistan and Pakistan have different agendas from the United

States. For instance, much has been made about disagreements between Washington and Afghan President Hamid Karzai. National Security Analyst Stephen Biddle argues that aside from specific individuals, be they President Karzai or provincial leaders, the “real potential for partnership lies in Afghan institutions,” and we must focus on bolstering them.<sup>21</sup> However, no one knows how to erect effective institutions of good governance from the outside, particularly in a country with Afghanistan’s complex history. Certainly the task is likely to be neither quick nor cheap, assuming it can be accomplished at all. Countries with far more stable security situations – from Kenya to India – have struggled for decades to build institutions of good governance. As President Karzai visited Washington and a battle to retake the Taliban stronghold in Kandahar appeared to loom, serious questions remained about America’s political strategy, the level of its commitment to state-building and the general capacity of its Afghan and allied partners on the ground. The shortage of allied trainers for an Afghan national security force in the spring of 2010, for example, left the United States to fill the gap. This debacle over trainers is symbolic of what the United States has done repeatedly when its allies and partners fell short: step in and pay the extra price.<sup>22</sup> Thus the costs mount, even though the results remain unclear. The United States should critically evaluate the Kandahar operation and assuming – as is likely – that the results indicate serious difficulties in sustaining central Afghan control over the region, support a more sustainable political arrangement.

The potential for growing instability in Pakistan raises profound questions for American security. Whereas the United States is hard-pressed to forge a long-term, clear-eyed political strategy for engaging this pivotal nuclear power bordering Afghanistan, the Chinese appear to have little difficulty identifying their core interests. Despite the generous



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7.5 billion dollar foreign assistance package that America is providing, courtesy of the Kerry-Lugar legislation, it is not obvious that it will either stabilize or reform Pakistan. In contrast, China's decisive offer to build and hand over two nuclear power plants is likely to impress Pakistan's leaders and induce their goodwill. Meanwhile, U.S. projects, along with other large development programs, are likely to become bogged down with red tape – even well-intended conditionality – and issues of accountability and corruption.

In an effort to effectively, wisely and strategically spend foreign assistance to stabilize Pakistan in the face of a potentially infectious insurgency and radicalization, the administration has opted to support a series of projects that will address an acute energy shortage. But the cause of Pakistan's energy shortage is as much the poorly organized and corrupt government in Pakistan as it is antiquated or insufficient technology. So while the United States attempts to work with and strengthen Pakistan's shaky government (for instance, there is no single ministry of energy but instead seven or eight ministries competing and controlling different aspects of energy policy), the Chinese have a different development model – and it just happens to be one that serves Beijing's national interest of keeping India on edge. This comparison with a Chinese assistance project does not negate the need for the United States to balance close cooperation with the government of Pakistan and the simultaneous need to keep strengthening the rule of law and civilian

rule inside a more equitable and economically viable country. But if the central assistance focus on energy does not come to fruition, many will ask whether this was the best focus or just another example of overstretch and failure to accomplish America's most fundamental goals by trying to do too much at once. Either way, U.S. interests suggest that more thinking about Pakistan's future is needed, both as it relates to the conflict in Afghanistan and with regard to Pakistan's potential to become an important partner for the United States.

### **Iran**

The challenge posed by Iran reveals the limits of American power. Negotiations with the regime seem unlikely to be effective. Military action is unlikely to provide lasting security to the United States and its allies. A policy of containment, however problematic, is more likely to offer sustainable benefits at acceptable risks. Given Iran's intransigence, this is not a very satisfying conclusion, but it a reasoned one based on the costs and benefits of different approaches. Again, a policy of restraint is the best in a menu of unattractive options.

The transgressions of Iran continue to add up. Iran's previously undisclosed facility near Qom and news that it had acquired a device to ignite a nuclear bomb provided farther evidence that engagement was failing to change Iranian behavior. Iran's hard-line leaders have managed to accelerate nuclear programs and suppress opposition, although it remains far from certain how successful new 'third-generation' centrifuges would prove to be in supplying Iran with highly enriched uranium.

Despite a kinder and gentler U.S. policy of engagement during the administration's first year, there has been no credible evidence that the current Iranian regime can be dissuaded from crossing that fateful point to possessing the bomb. While the Obama administration did not create this coming train

wreck, it has to recognize how its initial policy approach has been exploited by the regime in Tehran. By April 2010, National Security Advisor General James Jones made it known that the administration was indeed forced to conclude that the Iranian regime was not serious about engagement.

The somber testimony of the then-Director of National Intelligence, retired ADM Dennis Blair, before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in February 2010 detailed Iran's nuclear ambitions during the year in which the United States stepped back from a more confrontational policy and sought more concerted engagement with the regime under Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Iran was flouting the U.N. Security Council by swelling its stockpile of low-enriched uranium and installing more than 8,000 centrifuges at its Natanz enrichment plant. Meanwhile, the clandestine enrichment facility at Qom, revealed in September 2009, fits with Iran's strategy of keeping open the option to build a nuclear weapon; as a consequence, there is a "real risk" of cascading proliferation as neighboring states seek "nuclear options" to counter the Iranian bomb. "Iran is technically capable of producing enough HEU [Highly Enriched Uranium] for a weapon in the next few years, if it chooses to do so;" and, finally, Iran already possesses a variety of missiles on which to launch a nuclear warhead, including the Shahab-3 medium-range ballistic missile.<sup>23</sup>

Iran has been playing for time, and its recent diplomatic engagement with Turkey and Brazil demonstrates some of the potential influence enjoyed by rising power centers. President Ahmadinejad's ambiguous statement in early February that Iran might accept the Russian-backed plan for Iran to ship its enriched uranium out of the country to be sent back in a form from which it would be harder to produce weapons, was not a sign of caving in but once again a clever way to avoid harsh international pressure. When

Ahmadinejad saw that the West would not bite at this deception, he promptly reversed course and announced an accelerated program within Iran to enrich uranium up to a level of 20 percent, placing Iran within a close distance to realizing weapon-grade nuclear fuel. The policy of soft engagement has run its course. As Ashton Carter pointed out in an earlier report, without a "turbocharged carrots-and-sticks" policy, there was scant chance Iran's government under Ahmadinejad would alter course.<sup>24</sup>

To be sure, the Obama administration was not wrong to extend an olive branch. The United States needed to demonstrate that it was not reckless but a responsible steward of international and regional security; it needed to regain political capital – especially in Europe – in order to mobilize allies into common action and it needed to try to reset relations with Russia, and even China, to test the limits of major-power cooperation.

What the administration will need to do in the coming months, however, is to continually resist pressure to resort to military force to resolve the challenge posed by Iran. While diplomatic engagement can remain on the table, the administration may eventually need a third way between the extremes of watered-down sanctions and a military strike with certain costs and uncertain benefits. One possibility is to adopt a strategy of comprehensive containment, which in turn should comprise at least four elements: physical, economic, moral and social.

First, the prudent response to Iran's growing threat to the region is the vigorous geographic and physical containment of the country. The Pentagon's 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review advances the concept of "geographic containment" as a means of coping with a potentially failing nuclear-weapon state or a state that might transfer nuclear weapons to terrorists. The report calls for physical steps, namely deploying "an integrated, layered defense

network in multiple geographic environments” that could help deter an attack but also help a response should an attack occur.<sup>25</sup> In the midst of escalating tensions this year, the administration announced that the United States was providing missile defenses to four Gulf countries, in addition to Saudi Arabia and Israel, which already had acquired them. The deployment marked the first of four phases for providing effective defense, with the first phase focused on using the proven technologies of the sea-based Aegis weapon system and SM-3 interceptor missile as part of “new, tailored, regional deterrence” architecture.<sup>26</sup>

Second, comprehensive containment certainly means even tighter and smarter economic sanctions. New sanctions with teeth that bite the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps can no longer ignore Iran’s energy sector, given that hydrocarbons account for 80 percent of the state’s revenues. Although Iran has stockpiled oil and struck deals with China and Venezuela to prepare for such a contingency, sanctions on the energy sector during a time when Iran needs to be focused on its internal situation will help apply pressure on the leadership. Serious sanctions also need to further circumscribe Iran’s financial markets and that means coming to grips with the critical role played by Dubai in facilitating Iran’s transactions.

Third, a comprehensive containment policy should have a moral dimension. The Iranian regime is currently locked in a potentially vicious cycle of oppression to consolidate power, which in turn opens up greater interest within Iran to embrace civil resistance. Though the so-called “color revolutions” such as the Orange Revolution in Ukraine have not always ushered in robust democratic change, Iran’s opposition Green Movement is a serious opposition force. America must do what is right and speak out against human rights abuses in Iran.

Fourth, and closely related to the third salient of comprehensive containment is to recognize the

growing importance of Iranian domestic politics and society. The watershed June 12, 2009, election and the grassroots movement that it engendered caught the world off guard, and the United States has been slowly absorbing the reality of its potential. While outsiders will have to be circumspect about what is done publicly to support the Green Movement, assisting the movement may be the only realistic possible way to halt a dangerous Iranian nuclear military program. Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, has made a forceful argument for supporting the Green Movement, declaring that by doing nothing the United States is harming its own interests and failing to support people who deserve assistance.<sup>27</sup> A government potentially brought to power from within this movement offers a far better alternative to the current regime. No one knows if it can succeed, but the Iranian regime proceeds with executing opposition protesters for “waging war on God.” Although there is a tipping point at which the promotion of an opposition movement within a country may become outright intervention, there are more restrained ways to help support human rights and more pluralistic movements through indirect diplomatic means, which allow civil society to support other civil society movements.

Meanwhile, a comprehensive containment strategy does not mean abandoning engagement. Negotiation can remain on the table for that day if and when Iran seeks a diplomatic settlement. As National Security Advisor General James Jones has observed, the present Iranian leadership has not taken the offer of diplomacy seriously.<sup>28</sup> That does not mean giving up on engagement, but it certainly means placing engagement into a larger, more hard-edged policy framework until negotiations can be conducted with positive effect. The Obama administration needs, in a case like that of Iran, to be able to move from engagement to a more confrontational policy. But rather than lurching from dialogue to conflict, the alternative

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grounded in restraint should be to search for middle ground, which in the case of Iran rests on containing even a potentially nuclear Iran. Containment will not be easy, but it is still preferable to another regional war.

### North Korea

North Korea is a case in which the United States has pursued a policy of restraint. Now North Korean actions have made a policy of pure restraint and engagement next to impossible. Even so, given the alternatives, the United States will be wise to keep its actions measured and in full support of its Republic of Korea ally.

North Korea not only avoided serious Six Party Talks but also apparently committed one of the worst violations of the 1953 Armistice by sinking a South Korean ship and killing 46 sailors on board. The torpedo episode has challenged American restraint, and the United States has stood side by side with South Korea and pledged that appropriate punishment would be taken, with an apparent emphasis on suspending South Korea trade with the North and further targeted financial sanctions. Both Seoul and Washington have demonstrated restraint under pressure, which suggests a careful calculation of costs and benefits that would accrue

from a military reprisal. North Korea was likely to be able to control the escalation ladder by always being willing to engage in further strikes, provided that the United States and South Korea were not seriously threatening the regime's survival. Indeed, a limited war would reinforce the legitimacy of the North Korean regime at a time of potential political transition turmoil. Meanwhile, triggering a nuclear war was a distant but real possibility.

In short, it is necessary to contemplate potential changes, even conflict, on the Korean Peninsula and how the United States may fare in the region after the collapse of Kim Jong-il or even unification. The stakes are high in North Korea, not only because of its nuclear weapons, but also because of the impending but highly uncertain transition in the North after the passing of an increasingly frail Kim Jong-il. Because of the strategic risks, the Obama administration has prudently decided thus far not to pick a fight with North Korea – despite its seeming desire to start one – but rather to seek alignment with other regional powers, especially South Korea. But by deciding to isolate North Korea, the United States is in effect outsourcing the task of dealing with North Korea to China.<sup>29</sup>

The decision to emphasize regional harmony and get North Korea to return to negotiations has aligned the United States with Northeast Asian capitals. The United States is focused on changing North Korean policy through engagement rather than changing the regime through other means. However, even this more limited objective is becoming increasingly complicated, because of North Korea's behavior and because of the health of its leader. North Korea apparently deliberately sank the *Cheonan*, a South Korean Navy corvette patrolling in the Yellow Sea.<sup>30</sup> While an investigation of the submarine sinking was being completed, Kim Jong-il visited China and affirmed his interest in diplomacy, not by returning directly to Six Party Talks, but to talks to create a favorable environment for returning to the Six Party Talks. Such circumlocution is the



hallmark of North Korean negotiating behavior. Thus, he sought to demonstrate diplomatic flexibility at the very moment when the South Korean public sentiment demanded punishment. North Korea's engagement, in other words, was designed to escalate tensions, the response to which was likely to serve Pyongyang's interest: an escalation of tensions that North Korea was prepared to "win" by moving closer to a war that it reckoned Seoul and Washington would avoid, or forcing South Korea to return to feckless Six Party Talks after absorbing a brutal setback. Democracies focused on engagement alone will have difficulty with autocratic regimes willing to employ deadly fire-and-deny gambits.<sup>31</sup> However, the costs of conflict will be largely left to the United States, as suggested by the possible delay in the United States relinquishing wartime operational control to its South Korean ally.

Recognizing the costs of more muscular options, the Obama administration has sought to maintain peace on the Korean Peninsula. It comprehends the reasons for needing to engage North Korea. First, as with Burma, it puts the United States in alignment rather than at odds with the other powers of Northeast Asia. This is crucial because how North Korea is managed is likely to determine America's future position in the region. Second, with the prospect of regime transition around the corner, engaging the leadership to try to anticipate the impact of Kim Jong-il's departure is only prudent. Third, the experience of adopting a hard-line posture toward North Korea, as the United States did during the first term of George W. Bush, only enhanced rather than contained North Korea's nuclear program. While North Korea may not surrender its nuclear weapons, perhaps we can at least hope to limit the arsenal's size and capability through active diplomatic engagement.

Surely, the administration needs to look at engagement as a regional exercise, too. The United States has more to lose than simply North Korea's respect. If the United States fails to show South Korea and

Japan that it is a reliable but stabilizing influence, then America's future foothold in East Asia can be put at risk. North Korea's penchant for precipitating a crisis whenever it is dissatisfied with its situation is predictable, if unhelpful. Nonetheless, overreacting without a political strategy usually requires the outside powers to make concessions that in effect reward bad behavior. The U.S. fixation on the nuclear issue also diverts us from the economic, political and social change underway within North Korea. What are the chances that a third-generation Kim dynastic transfer of power to a man in his 20s, without his father's or grandfather's legitimacy, will be met with universal support within the party, the military and the society as a whole? How are South Korea, China and the United States each preparing for possible transition scenarios, including upheaval? To prepare for this uncertain future, engagement with the other members of the Six Parties may be as important as engaging North Korea.

Making the best of this situation would seem to require less focus on engaging North Korea and a greater focus on having a positive effect on what we can influence: namely, preserving America's historic gains realized after World War II and then the Cold War. Placing South Korea in the driver's seat means helping it deprive Pyongyang of all revenue flowing from the Kaesong industrial area, where some 45,000 North Korean workers provide Kim Jong-il a monthly stipend of perhaps 4 million dollars. The handling of the reversion of wartime operational control, which was set for April 2012, is another crucial issue, because perceptions of alliance strength and weakness hinge on how the allies manage the eventual end of the Combined Forces Command.

In trying to slow nuclear proliferation involving North Korea, the United States is in a difficult bind. Previous attempts to undermine the regime in North Korea actually contributed to greater nuclear proliferation; the return to a focus on

diplomacy aimed at curbing North Korea's nuclear ambitions appears at least to be slowing down the growth of the North Korean nuclear arsenal. The United States has to be prepared for an uncertain succession in Pyongyang and how change in the North might alter America's position in the region. Accordingly, the Obama administration is prudent to adhere to a multilateral diplomatic approach of keeping dialogue open with North Korea, but not rushing headlong into a process that ignores the historical record of North Korean intransigence or rewards inaction. At the same time, the administration needs to be prepared to increase pressure and even engage in a limited confrontation with North Korea in response to its most objectionable actions. But even here the Obama administration will be wise to ensure that it is fully supporting its ally in Seoul rather than attempting to make a unilateral policy from Washington. In this regard, the administration, with its restrained approach, has been an exemplar.

### China

The Obama administration has placed a premium on engaging and improving relations with major powers in general and it is courting China in particular. Because the United States relies increasingly on China, however, it does not follow as is often assumed or stated that it will be easy to achieve convergent interests. It may well be true, as the president said in July 2009, that "The relationship between the United States and China will shape the 21st century, which makes it as important as any bilateral relationship in the world." But that fact does not alter Chinese nationalism, China's growing confidence in its national power and its mercantilist policies that focus on the acquisition of resources at the expense of other interests in order to maintain high levels of economic growth deemed essential for political stability. In other words, complex interdependence with China has not halted competition with China.

Consider the degree of change from the vantage point of the Chinese, who have seen their country's economy double every eight years for the past three decades.<sup>32</sup> Why should China rely on the United States to protect its interests? It is far from clear that a successful China will continue to countenance the exercise of U.S. power in East Asia and the Pacific and Indian Oceans in the years to come. Similarly, even in farther-flung parts of the developing world, from Africa to the Western Hemisphere, the Chinese model may be increasingly competitive with an American-centered liberal international order. Beijing is not necessarily adopting Washington's approach; rather, according to Stefan Halper of Cambridge University, the Beijing consensus is replacing the Washington consensus.<sup>33</sup> Recognizing these uncertainties, the Obama administration is not simply engaging China in areas of mutual interest but simultaneously engaging a wider network of Asian allies and partners, especially in East Asia, Oceania and South Asia. Yet, in order to sustain this heightened level of Asian engagement, the administration recognizes that it needs to balance its long-term interests vis-à-vis China and a rising Asia with its hard security commitments and challenges in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia.

Given China's growing economy, increasing influence over international affairs, dialogue and cooperation between Washington and Beijing are crucial in meeting common challenges, addressing shared interests, managing and averting unnecessary competition and building mutual understanding. Recent cooperation in managing the global financial crisis, including the coordination of the world's two largest economic stimulus packages, provided a foundation for taking cooperation to a higher level. Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg briefly used the term "strategic reassurance" to help define a key element of what Secretary of State Hillary Clinton envisions as "positive, cooperative and comprehensive relations." But

Steinberg's term was quickly jettisoned, as no short phrase fully captures the intricacy of Sino-U.S. relations. Indeed, the phrase "strategic reassurance" may have suggested a less active relationship than the one demanded by global security challenges and intended by the administration. Thus, the precise agenda for cooperation remains a work in progress.<sup>34</sup>

Coping with a rising China is perhaps the biggest, long-term challenge to President Obama's engagement policy. For years, U.S. officials have gambled that a wealthier China more integrated into the prevailing international system would become a more responsible great power. But convergence remains more a long-term hope than a near-term reality. Halper argues that the magnetism of China's authoritarian governing model, which provides "rapid growth, stability, and the promise of a better life for its citizens," albeit at a cost of freedom, is increasing at the very time when the United States is in relative decline. To be sure, China faces huge questions about whether it can sustain high economic growth rates beyond the next 10 or 15 years and, even if it does, what either economic success or weakness could portend for political stability. Either way, engaging the China of today may be easier than engaging an even more powerful – or more brittle – China tomorrow.

While the administration has on occasion oversold the possibility of rapid policy agreement with China, whether on climate change, Iran sanctions or currency policy, the potential for security cooperation with China remains important to addressing both traditional and non-traditional security issues. However, the growing assertiveness of China's PLA-Navy underscores the enormity of the challenge of military cooperation. On April 10, 2010, a large Chinese naval flotilla, including two submarines and eight destroyers, sailed between two Japanese islands near Japan's Okinotorishima atoll, en route to the central Philippine Sea and the Pacific. The Maritime Self-Defense Force dispatched two

destroyers to follow the flotilla, a move that prompted the Chinese to fly a helicopter within close range of one of the Japanese destroyers. The Chinese flotilla was reportedly conducting "open-sea actual-force confrontation training" and "opinion war, psychological war and legal war."<sup>35</sup> The fact that this unprecedented maneuver occurred in the midst of difficult negotiations on bases between Japan and the United States was seen as a deliberate provocation, an announcement that China would be increasingly staking its claims to waters off East Asia.

Some see China's maritime power as increasingly assertive in the past decade, whether with respect to a Chinese fighter intercept and collision with a U.S. Navy EP-3 surveillance aircraft in 2001 or the use of two commercial cargo ships to cross the bow of the Impeccable ocean surveillance ship in 2009.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the first-ever port visit by the Chinese Navy to the Middle East, when two warships docked in Abu Dhabi in March 2010, was seen as a signal that the vast resource-importing nation of China would not always be content to simply rely on American protection of its crucial sea lines of communication. To be sure, some of China's naval actions were seen as adding to the international public good, in particular the deployment since December 2008 of three ships to the Gulf of Aden to contribute to international antipiracy patrols.<sup>37</sup> Many see China eventually using its vast coastal frontage as the pretext for a future move into further blue-water navy operations, thereby challenging the American presumption of maritime dominance in the theater.<sup>38</sup>

But whether that long-term trend develops or not, what should be of greatest concern for American security planners is the relative cost-effectiveness of China's strategy of anti-access and area-denial strategy (with a particular focus on antiship missiles designed to sink America's highest value naval platform, the aircraft carrier) compared with the far more expensive maintenance of large surface

ships and fixed bases for the United States. Asia is spending less on defense than the United States, and in a manner that is more sustainable. China's defense budget has quintupled since the late 1990s; the official defense budget for 2010 is 78 billion dollars within a nominal GDP of around 5 trillion dollars (or 9 trillion dollars in purchasing-power parity). That level, while perhaps understated, represents well under 2 percent of China's economy. India's defense budget is 32 billion dollars within a nominal economy of 1.4 trillion dollars (and thus consumes just over 2 percent of GDP). Japan spends about 1 percent on defense within a 5 trillion-dollar economy. Including current military operations, the United States is presently spending nearly 5 percent on defense (more than 700 billion dollars within an aggregate economy of 14 to 15 trillion dollars).<sup>39</sup> Globally, the United States accounts for nearly 42 percent of the world's defense expenditures. While China's economy is projected to grow at nearly 10 percent this year and India's economy set to rise almost as high, countries with mature economies, like the United States and Japan, are not likely to be able to spend more than they are now. In the case of the United States, the pressures to spend considerably less are bound to mount.

Increasingly, Asian militaries are improving both quantitatively and qualitatively: moving from coastal navies to fleets with green- and even blue-water capabilities, fielding at least fourth-generation aircraft and combining technological advances that will make most militaries faster and give them a longer reach, with more mobility and more lethal firepower. Yet the impressive degree of modernization is not an arms race, and many a country's plans for more grand expansion are being deferred. For instance, China is building Type 071 Landing Platform Docks that can support helicopters and transport up to 800 troops. At the same time, however, China is not moving quickly on plans to build aircraft carriers; plans to convert the Russian-built Varyag aircraft carrier into a Chinese carrier

training platform appear to be moving slowly. Similarly, India, even with its desire for a carrier-centered navy, is choosing to extend the life of two 50-year-old British-built carriers while waiting for Russia to refit the Admiral Gorshkov it decommissioned in the mid-1990s. China is leading the way with thinking about asymmetric uses of its capabilities. Equipped with enhanced Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) and advanced anti-ship missiles (YJ-83 or YJ62), China can use cyber war and other asymmetric measures to deny superior American conventional capabilities access to East Asia in a crisis. To be sure, the U.S. Navy and military forces will remain superior in number and even in many technologies. Asked Secretary of Defense Robert Gates: "Does the number of warships we have and are building really put America at risk when the U.S. battle fleet is larger than the next 13 navies combined, 11 of which belong to allies and partners?"<sup>40</sup> While the Secretary was discussing the need to focus on real requirements rather than inflated budgets that were not affordable, perhaps he also meant to underscore the need to focus more on strategic objectives (access to China's periphery in a crisis) rather than just more military means.

Just as a 'Beijing consensus' offers an alternative to a western model or the so-called 'Washington consensus,' which refers to making assistance conditional on sound policies by the host government, China and Asia are also pursuing an approach to military modernization different from that of the United States. Rather than trying to converge or compete head on, they appear determined to alter the rules.

Long-term uncertainty about the future behavior of a more powerful China requires the United States to husband its resources and get its near-term ends and means better aligned. The United States needs to seek cooperation when it is possible but not exaggerate the degree to which interests coincide.



#### IV. THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF RESTRAINT

What happens when restraint is not rewarded? Although the United States has been heavily criticized for pursuing unilateral, military-centric approaches to foreign affairs, it does not follow that U.S. adherence to a more restrained policy will be more successful or respected. In the Obama administration's pursuit of active international engagement, its restraint has been more diplomatic than military and financial. Nevertheless, it is possible to consider at least three unintended consequences of a policy of restraint. First, adversaries may mistake diplomacy for weakness, especially when it is not backed by force. Second, a focus on shedding burdens onto partners may cause traditional allies to become apprehensive and drift away. Third, Americans may misconstrue military inaction, multilateral diplomacy and a patient reliance on building partnerships as tantamount to failure.

One risk is that competitors will confuse restraint with powerlessness and perceive a vacuum of power. Some may assume that the Obama administration employs rhetoric and diplomacy because of an inability or lack of will to exert hard power. Public expectations for a muscular response to North Korea's sinking of a South Korean naval vessel show how tricky a choice this is: sanctions and suspending talks may be useful, but engaging in more aggressive maritime patrols could cede control of decisions that could escalate the crisis from political civilian leaders to naval commanders at sea.<sup>41</sup> An adversary's reading of American decline may be entirely erroneous, but it is a logical inference from some indicators that suggest a relative loss of power. If the United States, in its restraint, appears to exercise power too softly, other countries may seek to take advantage of an opportunity to exercise newly acquired muscle.

After decades of enjoying global dominance, many Americans are rightfully anxious about losing a pre-eminent position in the world. For instance, it is a serious question whether the United States will be able to go on spending at least twice the percentage of GDP on defense that other leading developed powers spend. Secretary of Defense Gates suggested that defense budgets would have to stop growing, if not start shrinking. After all, can the world's leading debtor afford to be the world's leader? The 2010 QDR offers only broad guidance for sizing military force structure, but the budgetary requirements suggested in that document and existing military service plans will be difficult to sustain at a time when the baby boom generation is retiring, when deficits are at an all-time high and when new economic power centers are demanding a greater political voice over international regimes. The need for cost-effective U.S. engagement in world affairs is palpable, but that does not mean the United States is in decline. Historical determinism is ahistorical. History is as oblique as often as it is linear: Recall the predictions in the 1980s that the Soviet Union would endure for a long time, or predictions in the 1990s that Japan would soon become the world's leading economic power. Recall, too, the fits of American triumphalism in the 1990s and predictions that the world's sole superpower would be overtaken by a diffusion of power to China and India.

A second unintended consequence of restraint is that allies may read it as a lack of resolve to defend their interests. They may think that America's extended hand to adversaries and nontraditional partners comes at the expense of their interests and thereby erodes the trust on which alliances are founded. It may not matter whether the policy is a result of U.S. decline or a shrewd calculus. Allies may be motivated to hedge their bets, either by distancing themselves from the United States, forging new agreements and partnerships with multiple states or investing in their national capabilities at the expense of alliance cooperation. But there is

no reason why a policy of restraint has to neglect traditional allies. Indeed, the initially restrained response to North Korea's torpedo attack on a South Korean corvette demonstrated that the United States can use a crisis to reinforce its traditional alliances, given that Washington at once played a supporting role to South Korea's leadership and patched up a feud with Japan over bases.

A third unintended consequence of restraint is that international security challenges may simply prove to be intractable. Many security challenges, like those involving nuclear, energy, resource and cyber issues, will bedevil even the best strategies. A constellation of broad global trends in energy, resources, the environment, economics and demographics are dangers to security in the 21st century. State-based threats will not disappear; indeed, the proliferation of post-modern tools – from newly accessible weapons to information technology – will foster competing power centers around the globe. And non-state actors will also become more powerful by dint of the same proliferating technology and diffusion of knowledge. A raft of complex global problems centered on resources and the environment will force us to manage both threats and challenges, some of which will have no easy solution – certainly none within the purview of a single nation. Solving or even managing the array of difficult problems will not be simple. It is not just traditional militaries that threaten states. Best solutions may be slow, but America's democratic electorate may be too impatient for deliberate, multi-faceted nuanced approaches that take years to bear fruit. Even while the American public may be able to digest this complexity, it is far from clear that the two- and four-year electoral cycles will summon greater bipartisanship and foresight in foreign affairs than we have witnessed during recent campaigns. While we can hope for a growing surge of pragmatic centrism, patient and wise international policy approaches will falter without the forbearance and faith of the American people.

In short, restraint itself can be risky internationally and problematic domestically. Beyond the unintended consequences are the predictable challenges of domestic politics. There has always been a constituency in America for *not* engaging potential adversaries abroad. America's Founding Fathers warned against getting caught up in European diplomacy. In the late 1800s, there was a fear that "American men might prove susceptible to degeneration through overexposure to French culture."<sup>42</sup> President Woodrow Wilson was wary of old European power politics and secret covenants. During the Eisenhower administration, there was a strong line of argument before the first U.S.-Soviet summit meeting in four-power talks at Geneva in 1955 and even more so in the first bilateral meeting at Camp David with Nikita Khrushchev in 1959 that Americans always lose their shirts when they negotiate abroad.

## V. THE WAY FORWARD: RESTRAINT

There is no surefire way to dispel doubts about America's long-term staying power other than through wise actions that remain focused on the long-term goal of building a sustainable world order consonant with American values. Practicing restraint may ultimately be more important than 'winning' any of the conflicts that currently face us, because no amount of force is likely to eradicate corruption, terrorism and proliferation. But managing these complex threats at reasonable cost will determine the prosperity not only of the United States and its allies, but of the world. The preservation of American power, rather than the full and short-term exertion of it, may be most beneficial to preserving future global stability.

In the face of prolonged uncertainty, the best posture is to remain committed to the goal of building a sustainable, American-led order. Americans need to think more like Sun Tzu, who advocated winning whole and without fighting, and less like Clausewitz, for whom war was a continuation of politics by other means. Strategy must trump technology. The American way of war can remain anchored in superior force and technology, but we should not succumb to the myth that we have to resort to force because it is our natural advantage. The stark diminution of U.S. means requires a recalibration of our ends and means. Limitations on U.S. power require restraint. It is a necessity, not a luxury. Restraint means accepting unintended consequences, including perceived weakness or lack of resolve, as well as some problems that can only be triaged. If competitors or adversaries confuse American restraint with weakness in ways that do damage to America's vital interests, then U.S. officials will have to be ready to dial up an appropriate level of coercive power. If allies and partners read restraint as a lack of commitment, then U.S. policymakers should act to reassure them through tailored responses. If some global problems will have to persist unresolved, then U.S. officials should craft a deliberate art of practice for making clear priorities.

The Obama administration appears to have absorbed the lesson that the great powers that endure are those that learn to adapt. The administration at least speaks of rebalancing American power and purpose in the world through a range of efforts including: restoring U.S. economic health, political legitimacy and human capital; revitalizing America's civilian power institutions, especially its diplomatic and development organs, to catalyze others into action; applying non-military means and whole-of-government approaches to end or prevent security threats and solve emerging global challenges; exercising strategic restraint to avoid getting stuck in unwinnable insurgencies and averting unnecessary and dangerous military competition; and building the capacity of partners so that they may better support local, regional, or global security and stability.

The Obama administration is moving forward on all these avenues, with diplomatic engagement becoming the centerpiece of its foreign policy approach. Asked to define the single accomplishment she would like to be remembered for at the end of the administration's tenure, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton replied, "That we returned American leadership for the 21st century."<sup>43</sup> This is a tall order and not something that can be achieved quickly. While surely it is the right objective from the perspective of the American national interest it begs the question, "At what cost?" Engagement without adequate restraint quickly reaches its limits, at least with respect to near-term dividends.

As a practical matter, the Obama administration must strive to maintain equilibrium between ends and means, defense and diplomacy, cooperation and confrontation, immediate and long-term challenges, and a turbulent Greater Middle East and a rising Asia. There is no magic way to maintain a long-term equilibrium. To bring ends and means in line, three ideas merit debate: fiscal restraint that includes a possible reduction in defense spending; military restraint that means maintaining a long

fuse before resorting to military power; and political restraint that calls for resisting the temptation to step in just because partners and other powers are slow to do so.

### **Fiscal Restraint**

Bogged down with tremendous security commitments, including wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States also faces the crucial challenge of righting the economic ship of state. Pressured by intemperate impulses and rising power centers, the United States is being pinched further by diminishing means.

The United States faces debilitating deficits and rising debt, which in the longer run threaten to “increase interest rates, crowd out private investment, reduce economic growth, and impair Americans’ standard of living,” according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.<sup>44</sup> The United States presently has a national debt of about 13 trillion dollars that is increasing every month.<sup>45</sup> In April 2010, the United States posted its 19th consecutive monthly budget deficit, the longest skein of monthly shortfalls in the nation’s history. The monthly deficit of 83 billion dollars was expected to contribute to a projected 1.5 trillion-dollar budget deficit in 2010, slightly higher than the previous year’s 1.4 trillion-dollar deficit.<sup>46</sup> With some 78 million baby boomers approaching retirement, entitlements including Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid are taking up an increasing part of the government’s budget. An aging population also means that by 2016 payroll tax revenues will fall below benefit payments, which means that Social Security will have to be cut or money will have to be found elsewhere – from other programs, higher taxes or more government borrowing.<sup>47</sup> Growth in the ‘big three’ domestic programs is expected to account “for all of the projected increase in federal program (non-interest) spending as a share of the economy over the next 40 years and beyond.”<sup>48</sup> With the nation’s public sector deficit expected to reach 11 percent

of GDP, it was not surprising that nearly half of all Americans thought it likely that the government may default in the next decade.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, the United States’ economy is perceived to be vulnerable to a variety of shocks, as most recently suggested by the alarming fluctuation in stock market values in which average prices plunged nearly 1,000 points on May 6, 2010. While that 15-minute collapse may have been caused by algorithm-driven trading, some external shocks may be more difficult to recover from, including another financial meltdown, a new surge in energy prices or a drop in the value of the dollar, whether or not it remains the world’s reserve currency. On this last point, Zachary Karabell warns, “India continues to use English as a lingua franca, more than 60 years after the British departed, not because Britain remains a world empire but because India needs a common tongue and English was already in place. The dollar today serves the same purpose for the world. The ubiquity of the dollar allows Americans to believe that their country will automatically retain its rightful place as global economic leader. That is a dangerous dream, an economic opiate from which we would do well to wean ourselves.”<sup>50</sup>

Surely defense budgets must cease to grow. Secretary Gates, having supported a 2010 Pentagon budget of more than 700 billion dollars, is leading the charge to start cutting. His early forays into fiscal stringency have already touched on sensitive nerves within the defense community. In an effort to combat rising military health costs, he has recommended reducing overhead costs by up to 15 billion dollars a year. More philosophically, Secretary Gates has invoked the wisdom of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who “strongly believed that the United States – indeed, any nation – could only be as militarily strong as it was economically dynamic and fiscally sound.” Gates also echoed Eisenhower’s admonition against spending too much on “a large standing defense establishment maintained at a high

level of readiness.” According to Gates, “Eisenhower was wary of seeing his beloved republic turn into a muscle-bound, garrison state – militarily strong, but economically stagnant and strategically insolvent.”<sup>51</sup> “The national economic situation is different than it has ever been in modern times,” said Secretary Gates. He added, “If we want to sustain the current force, we have no alternative.”<sup>52</sup> But having already backed a defense budget of more than 700 billion dollars for 2011 and issued a 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review that advocated for further institutionalizing irregular warfare capabilities without a dramatic scaling back of military forces, Secretary Gates was bound to run into much skepticism, not least from Congress.<sup>53</sup>

Unless the United States exercises restraint, it is likely to be confronted with more, not fewer, security burdens in the coming decade, despite the search for more burden sharing, more partners and support for diplomatic solutions and multilateralism. Even so, current defense spending plans are unsustainable. The Department of Defense (DOD) budget added more than 2 trillion dollars in real spending in the decade from 1998 through 2008. Only half of that increase was spent on the wars; the other half was spent on recapitalization and modernization of the force, especially personnel costs. Given the global and national financial circumstances, it is time for fiscal discipline across all parts of the budget, including defense.<sup>54</sup>

While there is not a one-to-one correlation between defense budget reductions and gains to the non-defense accounts of the federal budget, it does not follow that the United States can continue to spend as much on defense as it has in the past. Because of the economic trends confronting the United States in the decade ahead, we need a serious discussion on the mix of budget cuts (of both entitlements and discretionary spending), cost-saving reforms and tax increases that would allow the nation to reverse the momentum of growing debt that will pull down the country if not addressed.

Cuts to the defense budget, while sure to evoke controversy, will not necessarily have to hollow out the force or undermine readiness and operations. Of course, within the defense budget there are choices between the increasing expenditures on “butter” issues of health care, education and personnel versus the “guns” issues of procurement and current operations to fight, stabilize, deter and prevent conflict and cope with a range of contingencies. As Todd Harrison has documented, the cost of pay, pension, and health care have been steadily rising relative to acquisition and operations. One example of the rising welfare portion of the DOD budget relates to health care. Defense health care and health insurance cover nearly 10 million eligible beneficiaries, and Congress has enacted a TRICARE for Life program that provides supplemental insurance free of premiums for military retirees enrolled in Medicare. Moreover, the coverage was applied retroactively. The point is not to single out one program but simply to note that in the DOD budget, as with the overall federal budget, welfare costs are accounting for an increasing percentage of the budget.<sup>55</sup>

There is little doubt that fiscal restraint will force tough choices and tradeoffs over our hard power. Yet without rebalancing we will be spending more resources on an inheritance of limited utility rather than the kind of force needed to protect against tomorrow’s threats and complex challenges. Even with straight-lined budgets, the United States would have reduced naval and air dominance, and the size of its land forces would also be likely to be pared back. One important study from the Center for Naval Analyses recently laid out in clear terms why the U.S. Navy could not afford the number of ships it continues to be planning, and it will be stretched to retain key hubs in both the Arabian Peninsula (where it would be difficult to reintroduce assets in a crisis) and in the western Pacific (where presence and influence are increasingly important).<sup>56</sup> No doubt, innovations such as the proposed air-sea battle concept highlighted in the



QDR will be under pressure to find new efficiencies and ways to reduce redundancy. But in the search for efficiency, there may well also be new vulnerabilities and risks. It will be a tremendous challenge to determine tradeoffs between guns and butter, both within the defense budget and within the overall federal budget; but surely the issue must be addressed in the coming years. The idea that within the decade debt could represent nearly 100 percent of GDP – and that 15 percent of the federal budget could be spent on interest alone – should be a sufficient wake-up call for fiscal restraint.

### **Military Restraint**

Military force remains fundamental to preserving national interests, whether by deterring conflict, using force to counter enemies, bringing conflicts to an end, bolstering allies and partners or delivering emergency assistance. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, ADM Mike Mullen, has helped to brush off and update limited-war theory so that force need not always be the last resort, provided its use is limited, precise, proportionate and discriminating.<sup>57</sup> Thus, sometimes military restraint may mean employing the limited application of force to disrupt potential terrorist safe havens without assuming costly burdens of state-building. Other times military restraint may be forgoing the use of force, accepting some level of risk and pursuing more preventive economic-development measures. After all, any use of force can lead to mission creep and long-term military engagement. The United States needs to balance action with acceptable risk. There is no easy set of guidelines, and each case will have to be debated on its merits. While the United States must respond to attempts to use coercive power, it should also be slow to resort to it. As we should have discovered with the over-reaction to the events of 9/11 (namely the Iraq war), the exercise of U.S. power is a double-edged sword. Few are the issues as vital as President Lincoln's fight to save the Union, which, as he said, was "an issue which can only be tried by war and decided by victory."

Sometimes limited and incremental uses of force may only prolong or deepen a problem; in these rare instances, the United States may have to be prepared to conduct major military operations in concert with others. But even in these cases, being slow to rise to the bait of aggression is likely to buy time for winning greater legitimacy and political support.

President Obama's partial restraint and limited uses of force in general may help the United States to regain its legitimacy in world affairs. Although the president has employed force, whether in an escalation of the fighting in Afghanistan, drone attacks against suspected terrorist leaders or countering piracy, he has also avoided new interventions and pursued active diplomatic engagement.

Because legitimacy is power, the United States should further burnish its global legitimacy through soft power. To address these and other challenges, the president is attempting to craft a new narrative, mobilize friends, demobilize opponents, redefine problems, get America's economic house in order and rely on diplomatic and comprehensive solutions. The president's cautious approach to the use of military power abroad has bought the United States some breathing space to reassess strategies, rebuild coalitions and re-launch policies. Restraint can help conserve finite U.S. resources and potentially make America more resilient in light of tomorrow's uncertainties. Yet the United States will need both adroit policymaking and good fortune to convert initial international investments into money in the bank. As one prominent writer has advised, the United States will need to emulate Bismarck more than Britain, a reference to the need to stress working well with major powers rather than seeking just to balance them.<sup>58</sup> More practically, the United States will have to invest in its people and its institutions, and it will have to shift from a reactive military mind-set to a creative problem-solving mind-set that blends foresight with soft power.

## Political Restraint

Political restraint means understanding that forging effective partnerships for addressing vital issues will take time. It also means that other major powers will be reluctant to do America's bidding and may have conflicting goals, but that the United States still needs to persevere without always having to take the lead. As the White House recalibrates foreign relations, however, it should keep in mind the limited options available for influencing rogue actors, or even competitors with a different set of national interests. Reinforcing alliances, reassuring allies and partners and strengthening deterrence may be the most useful and cost-effective ways to approach an increasingly confrontational situation. Accordingly, what specific progress the United States makes in strengthening allies and partners, as well as what the United States can do to strengthen its own capacity, is likely to be more important than what U.S. officials do or say about a few spoiler nations. In this respect, refining how the United States provides effective security assistance to allies and partners is increasingly vital.

According to Andrew Kohut and the Pew Global Attitudes Project, America's image in most parts of the world has improved since the election of President Obama. As Kohut testified in March 2010, "By mid-2009, opinions of the United States in Western Europe, as well as major countries in Asia and Latin America, were about as positive as they were at the beginning of the decade, before George W. Bush took office." Western Europe showed the most marked improvement, with favorable views of the United States more than doubling, from 31 percent in 2008 to 64 percent in mid-2009.<sup>59</sup> But gains in predominantly Muslim countries, including Pakistan and Turkey, for instance, were much less dramatic, as not even President Obama's outreach could significantly lift America's favorability ratings out of the teens. In addition, by 2009, the global financial crisis

was further calling into question U.S. legitimacy, with 20 of 25 countries surveyed showing at least a plurality blaming the United States for its own economic woes.<sup>60</sup>

At day's end, we have to decide the character of American power and purpose. Although polishing America's image as a "shining city on the hill" may be difficult, it is a worthy pursuit and one over which Americans have considerable control. Eventually, a breathing space will allow the United States time to adapt and, as Tocqueville observed, repair itself. Eighteen months into the new administration, the enormosity of that challenge has settled in.<sup>61</sup> Secretary of State Clinton has said that the administration seeks above all to restore American leadership through the use of engagement and restraint.<sup>62</sup> In general, as the case studies suggest, the administration is indeed hewing to a policy of restraint. Officials also seem well aware that engagement is hardly a panacea. But they do at this point appear to be overselling what new partners will bring to the table. Are there enough capable partners willing to share the burdens of security consonant with U.S. interests? What is the new approach to building partners? Why will they be effective? And what happens when engagement fails to produce effective results, whether with respect to Iran's or North Korea's nuclear ambitions or China's role as a responsible great power? There are more questions than answers because the effectiveness of restraint depends above all else in its adroit application.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Pragmatic centrists searching for a new American security must be wary of both pessimists, who are convinced that such decline is not only well underway but irretrievable, and optimists, some of whom ideologically denounce those who recognize the possibility of declining power.<sup>63</sup> Both are wrong. Life is inseparable from risk, but there is no reason that a more restrained posture has to undercut U.S. national security. A pragmatic combination of engagement and restraint is the only viable means of sustaining U.S. power.

Alternative pathways are possible. Because the future is unknowable, the United States can rebuild its foundation from the inside out, focusing on what it can best control: the capacity of its people, the effectiveness of its government and the prudent conduct of its foreign relations. As the Roman statesman Seneca put it, “Not being able to govern events, I govern myself.”

With new power centers rising and American pre-eminence in jeopardy, it is worth reflecting on history. Many historians have asked the intriguing question of how western hegemony arose in the Middle Ages and endured to the present. The West’s pre-eminence was not obvious 500 years ago. “Why,” asked Fareed Zakaria, “did non-western countries stand still while the West moved forward?”<sup>64</sup> For Zakaria, private property rights, institutions of good governance and a robust civil society go far to explain the rise of the West.<sup>65</sup> Economic historian William Woodruff hypothesized in his seminal work *Impact of Western Man*, which outlines Europe’s rise through its search for God, glory and gold, that above all it was western adaptation over time that provided the crucial ingredient for success.<sup>66</sup> America, including both our society and our government, needs to embrace adaptation in the decades ahead.

As daunting as these challenges are, Americans can pursue a positive vision of the future and lead its partners toward it. We are wrong to believe that today’s global problems are unprecedentedly intractable, dangerous and unsolvable. Engagement of allies and

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*Engagement of allies and adversaries alike is vital to maintaining global order and preserving national interests.*

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adversaries alike is vital to maintaining global order and preserving national interests. The United States can reform its institutions, rebalance its books and invest in its people, while simultaneously pursuing more effective alliances and partnerships. Getting America’s own house in order is equally important and well within the capacity of mature leaders who exhibit foresight and strategic restraint. If legitimacy buttresses power, and indeed can be tantamount to power, then the United States needs to “learn to conduct its foreign policy with greater wisdom and restraint.”<sup>67</sup> The need for effective American leadership in international affairs remains undiminished.

When considering future policy, it is useful to stand an old policy question on its head: *How little is enough?* The United States must do enough to preserve global order, but often less than it *can* do, in order to preserve its national strength. Restraint is not a substitute for strategy. Rather, we need greater fiscal, military and diplomatic restraint in order to force us to become more strategic. Without restraint, we risk hastening our decline by failing to recognize the growing gap between our myriad objectives and our shrinking means. On the other hand, if we live within our means, and hew to pragmatic realist principles, there is ample reason for optimism. Optimism need not be unrealistic: problems can be resolved or at least better managed. A more humble America that is more sensitive to diverse views from around the world is ready to work together with others, and for all America’s relative decline in perceived and actual influence, there is every reason to believe that the United States will remain a powerful and unique contributor to global security.

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