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The Folly of Retrenchment: Why America Can't Withdraw From the World

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For seven decades, U.S. grand strategy was characterized by a bipartisan consensus on the United States' global role. Although successive administrations had major disagreements over the details, Democrats and Republicans alike backed a system of alliances, the forward positioning of forces, a relatively open international economy, and, albeit imperfectly, the principles of freedom, human rights, and democracy. Today, that consensus has broken down.

President Donald Trump has questioned the utility of the United States' alliances and its forward military presence in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. He has displayed little regard for a shared community of free societies and is drawn to authoritarian leaders. So far, Trump's views are not shared by the vast majority of leading Republicans. Almost all leading Democrats, for their part, are committed to the United States' traditional role in Europe and Asia, if not in the Middle East. Trump has struggled to convert his worldview into policy, and in many respects, his administration has increased U.S. military commitments. But if Trump wins reelection, that could change quickly, as he would feel more empowered and Washington would need to adjust to the reality that Americans had reconfirmed their support for a more inward-looking approach to world affairs. At a private speech in November, according to press reports, John Bolton, Trump's former national security adviser, even predicted that Trump could pull out of NATO in a second term. The receptiveness of the American people to Trump's "America first" rhetoric has revealed that there is a market for a foreign policy in which the United States plays a smaller role in the world.

Amid the shifting political winds, a growing chorus of voices in the policy community, from the left and the right, is calling for a strategy of global retrenchment, whereby the United States would withdraw its forces from around the world and reduce its security commitments. Leading scholars and policy experts, such as Barry Posen and Ian Bremmer, have called on the United States to significantly reduce its role in Europe and Asia, including withdrawing from NATO. In 2019, a new think tank, the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, set up shop, with funding from the conservative Charles Koch Foundation and the liberal philanthropist George Soros. Its mission, in its own words, is to advocate "a new foreign policy centered on diplomatic engagement and military restraint."

Global retrenchment is fast emerging as the most coherent and ready-made alternative to the United States' postwar strategy. Yet pursuing it would be a grave mistake. By dissolving U.S. alliances and ending the forward presence of U.S. forces, this strategy would destabilize the regional security orders in Europe and Asia. It would also increase the risk of nuclear proliferation, empower right-wing nationalists in Europe, and aggravate the threat of major-power conflict.

This is not to say that U.S. strategy should never change. The United States has regularly increased and decreased its presence around the world as threats have risen and ebbed. Even though Washington followed a strategy of containment throughout the Cold War, that took various forms, which meant the difference between war and peace in Vietnam, between an arms race and arms control, and between detente and an all-out attempt to defeat the Soviets. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States changed course again, expanding its alliances to include many countries that had previously been part of the Warsaw Pact.

Likewise, the United States will now have to do less in some areas and more in others as it shifts its focus from counter-terrorism and reform in the Middle East toward great-power competition with China and Russia. But advocates of global retrenchment are not so much proposing changes within a strategy as they are calling for the wholesale replacement of one that has been in place since World War II. What the United States needs now is a careful pruning of its overseas commitments--not the indiscriminate abandonment of a strategy that has served it well for decades.

RETRENCHMENT REDUX

Support for retrenchment stems from the view that the United States has overextended itself in countries that have little bearing on its national interest. According to this perspective, which is closely associated with the realist school of international relations, the United States is fundamentally secure thanks to its geography, nuclear arsenal, and military advantage. Yet the country has nonetheless chosen to pursue a strategy of "liberal hegemony," using force in an unwise attempt to perpetuate a liberal international order (one that, as evidenced by U.S. support for authoritarian regimes, is not so liberal, after all). Washington, the argument goes, has distracted itself with costly overseas commitments and interventions that breed resentment and encourage free-riding abroad.

Critics of the status quo argue that the United States must take two steps to change its ways. The first is retrenchment itself: the action of withdrawing from many of the United States' existing commitments, such as the ongoing military interventions in the Middle East and one-sided alliances in Europe and Asia. The second is restraint: the strategy of defining U.S. interests narrowly, refusing to launch wars unless vital interests are directly threatened and Congress authorizes such action, compelling other nations to take care of their own security, and relying more on diplomatic, economic, and political tools.

In practice, this approach means ending U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, withdrawing U.S. forces from the Middle East, relying on an over-the-horizon force that can uphold U.S. national interests, and no longer taking on responsibility for the security of other states. As for alliances, Posen has argued that the United States should abandon the mutual-defense provision of NATO, replace the organization "with a new, more limited security cooperation agreement," and reduce U.S. commitments to Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. On the question of China, realists have split in recent years. Some, such as the scholar John Mearsheimer, contend that even as the United States retrenches elsewhere, in Asia, it must contain the threat of China, whereas others, such as Posen, argue that nations in the region are perfectly capable of doing the job themselves.

Since Trump's election, some progressive foreign policy thinkers have joined the retrenchment camp. They diverge from other progressives, who advocate maintaining the United States' current role. Like the realists, progressive retrenchers hold the view that the United States is safe because of its geography and the size of its military. Where these progressives break from the realists, however, is on the question of what will happen if the United States pulls back. While the realists favoring retrenchment have few illusions about the sort of regional competition that will break out in the absence of U.S. dominance, the progressives expect that the world will become more peaceful and cooperative, because Washington can still manage tensions through diplomatic, economic, and political tools. The immediate focus of the progressives is the so-called forever wars--U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and the broader war on terrorism--as well as the defense budget and overseas bases.

Although the progressives have a less developed vision of how to implement retrenchment than the realists, they do provide some guideposts. Stephen Wertheim, a co-founder of the Quincy Institute, has called for bringing home many of the U.S. soldiers serving abroad, "leaving small forces to protect commercial sea lanes," as part of an effort to "deprive presidents of the temptation to answer every problem with a violent solution." He argues that U.S. allies may believe that the United States has been inflating regional threats and thus conclude that they do not need to increase their conventional or nuclear forces. Another progressive thinker, Peter Beinart, has argued that the United States should accept Chinese and Russian spheres of influence, a strategy that would include abandoning Taiwan.

IS LESS REALLY MORE?

The realists and the progressives arguing for retrenchment differ in their assumptions, logic, and intentions. The realists tend to be more pessimistic about the prospects for peace and frame their arguments in hardheaded terms, whereas the progressives downplay the consequences of American withdrawal and make a moral case against the current grand strategy. But they share a common claim: that the United States would be better off if it dramatically reduced its global military footprint and security commitments.

This is a false promise, for a number of reasons. First, retrenchment would worsen regional security competition in Europe and Asia. The realists recognize that the U.S. military presence in Europe and Asia does dampen security competition, but they claim that it does so at too high a price--and one that, at any rate, should be paid by U.S. allies in the regions themselves. Although pulling back would invite regional security competition, realist retrenchers admit, the United States could be safer in a more dangerous world because regional rivals would check one another. This is a perilous gambit, however, because regional conflicts often end up implicating U.S. interests. They might thus end up drawing the United States back in after it has left--resulting in a much more dangerous venture than heading off the conflict in the first place by staying. Realist retrenchment reveals a hubris that the United States can control consequences and prevent crises from erupting into war.

The progressives' view of regional security is similarly flawed. These retrenchers reject the idea that regional security competition will intensify if the United States leaves. In fact, they argue, U.S. alliances often promote competition, as in the Middle East, where U.S. support for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has emboldened those countries in their cold war with Iran. But this logic does not apply to Europe or Asia, where U.S. allies have behaved responsibly. A U.S. pullback from those places is more likely to embolden the regional powers. Since 2008, Russia has invaded two of its neighbors that are not members of NATO, and if the Baltic states were no longer protected by a U.S. security guarantee, it is conceivable that Russia would test the boundaries with gray-zone warfare. In East Asia, a U.S. withdrawal would force Japan to increase its defense capabilities and change its constitution to enable it to compete with China on its own, straining relations with South Korea.

The second problem with retrenchment involves nuclear proliferation. If the United States pulled out of NATO or ended its alliance with Japan, as many realist advocates of retrenchment recommend, some of its allies, no longer protected by the U.S. nuclear umbrella, would be tempted to acquire nuclear weapons of their own. Unlike the progressives for retrenchment, the realists are comfortable with that result, since they see deterrence as a stabilizing force. Most Americans are not so sanguine, and rightly so. There are good reasons to worry about nuclear proliferation: nuclear materials could end up in the hands of terrorists, states with less experience might be more prone to nuclear accidents, and nuclear powers in close proximity have shorter response times and thus conflicts among them have a greater chance of spiraling into escalation.

Third, retrenchment would heighten nationalism and xenophobia. In Europe, a U.S. withdrawal would send the message that every

country must fend for itself. It would therefore empower the far-right groups already making this claim--such as the Alternative for Germany, the League in Italy, and the National Front in France--while undermining the centrist democratic leaders there who told their populations that they could rely on the United States and NATO. As a result, Washington would lose leverage over the domestic politics of individual allies, particularly younger and more fragile democracies such as Poland. And since these nationalist populist groups are almost always protectionist, retrenchment would damage U.S. economic interests, as well. Even more alarming, many of the right-wing nationalists that retrenchment would empower have called for greater accommodation of China and Russia.

A fourth problem concerns regional stability after global retrenchment. The most likely end state is a spheres-of-influence system, whereby China and Russia dominate their neighbors, but such an order is inherently unstable. The lines of demarcation for such spheres tend to be unclear, and there is no guarantee that China and Russia will not seek to move them outward over time. Moreover, the United States cannot simply grant other major powers a sphere of influence--the countries that would fall into those realms have agency, too. If the United States ceded Taiwan to China, for example, the Taiwanese people could say no. The current U.S. policy toward the country is working and may be sustainable. Withdrawing support from Taiwan against its will would plunge cross-strait relations into chaos. The entire idea of letting regional powers have their own spheres of influence has an imperial air that is at odds with modern principles of sovereignty and international law.

A fifth problem with retrenchment is that it lacks domestic support. The American people may favor greater burden sharing, but there is no evidence that they are onboard with a withdrawal from Europe and Asia. As a survey conducted in 2019 by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found, seven out of ten Americans believe that maintaining military superiority makes the United States safer, and almost three-quarters think that alliances contribute to U.S. security. A 2019 Eurasia Group Foundation poll found that over 60 percent of Americans want to maintain or increase defense spending. As it became apparent that China and Russia would benefit from this shift toward retrenchment, and as the United States' democratic allies objected to its withdrawal, the domestic political backlash would grow. One result could be a prolonged foreign policy debate that would cause the United States to oscillate between retrenchment and reengagement, creating uncertainty about its commitments and thus raising the risk of miscalculation by Washington, its allies, or its rivals.

Realist and progressive retrenchers like to argue that the architects of the United States' postwar foreign policy naively sought to remake the world in its image. But the real revisionists are those who argue for retrenchment, a geopolitical experiment of unprecedented scale in modern history. If this camp were to have its way, Europe and Asia--two stable, peaceful, and prosperous regions that form the two main pillars of the U.S.-led order--would be plunged into an era of uncertainty.

THE CHINA CHALLENGE

Such are the inherent flaws of retrenchment, downsides that would apply at any time in the post-Cold War era. But the strategy is particularly poorly suited for the current moment, when the United States finds itself in a systemic competition with China, in which each side threatens the other not just because of what they do but also because of what they are.

To China and other autocracies, the United States' democratic system is inherently threatening. The free press promises to reveal vital secrets about the Chinese regime simply because it can, with American journalists' 2012 reports about elite corruption in China and Hong Kong and their 2019 revelations about the repression of China's Uighurs serving as Exhibits A and B. Social media, businesses, universities, nongovernmental organizations, and Congress have all played a role in undermining the regime in Beijing and sowing the seeds of democracy.

To combat these threats, Beijing is increasingly relying on repression, often facilitated by innovations such as facial recognition technology and artificial intelligence. But its ambitions are not limited to its own territory: Beijing has exported its tactics and technology abroad in an attempt to undermine liberalism. It has cracked down on foreign nongovernmental organizations with a presence in China, pressured foreign corporations to endorse its behavior, and grown more vocal within the UN Human Rights Council in an effort to weaken international norms. China has also attempted to illicitly influence Western democracies through operations such as illegally funneling money into Australian politics to support politicians favorable to China. These actions are seen as threatening by the United States.

The competition of systems between the United States and China increasingly involves all parts of society--business, the media, sports, technology, education, politics, diplomacy, intelligence, the military. This competition does not generally involve the use of force, but the geopolitical balance of power is a vital component. It is the United States' strength and the deterrence it produces that prevents this competition from spilling over into the military domain. The U.S. alliance system also provides a basis for helping other states preserve and strengthen their democratic systems in the shadow of Chinese influence. But advocates of retrenchment aim to weaken both the U.S. military and U.S. alliances. It is vitally important that the United States manage this competition of systems responsibly to protect U.S. interests and to prevent the rivalry from spiraling out of control.

In a moment of such ideological competition, global retrenchment would effectively concede victory to China and other authoritarian states. It would make it impossible to maintain a political alliance with the democratic world--most notably, with France, Germany, and the United Kingdom in Europe and with Australia, Japan, and South Korea in Asia. In the absence of U.S. support, these countries could never hold the line against China. Governments would begin to give Beijing the benefit of the doubt on everything from human rights to 5G wireless technology. As the U.S. defense budget plummeted, the United States would fall behind in new technologies, giving China an additional edge.

PICK AND CHOOSE

For all the flaws with retrenchment, it would be wrong for the United States to pretend that the world has not changed, to deny that the unipolar moment is over and that great-power competition has replaced counterterrorism as the central objective of U.S. foreign policy. In acknowledging the new circumstances it faces, the United States can employ retrenchment selectively, carefully abandoning some of its post-Cold War and post-9/11 commitments.

For one thing, the United States should end its involvement in the war in Afghanistan. There are now some 13,000 U.S. troops in the country, and 2019 was the deadliest year for them since 2014. The initial objective in Afghanistan was to root out al Qaeda after 9/11, but in subsequent years, the mission expanded to include preventing Afghanistan from destabilizing Pakistan and strengthening the Afghan government so it could stand up for itself and negotiate a peace agreement with the Taliban. But the Afghan government is likely to remain weak, and even if a peace deal were somehow achieved, the Taliban are unlikely to abide by it.

The United States cannot afford such an open-ended and deadly military conflict, one in which the only identifiable national interests are to avoid losing and to hold on to the gains in human rights, as precious as those are. The United States has achieved its fundamental objective of rooting out al Qaeda, and the threat from Islamist terrorism now arises more from other places, such as Iraq, Syria, and the Sahel. To mitigate the human cost of withdrawal, the United States should use diplomatic and economic tools to maintain governance standards and increase its intake of Afghan refugees. It is time to bring the longest-running American war to an end.

In Iraq and Syria, U.S. forces cannot simply leave, because the resurgence of the Islamic State (or ISIS) there remains a real danger. The Obama administration's withdrawal of forces from Iraq and its diplomatic neglect of Baghdad contributed to the rise of ISIS, and the Trump administration seems intent on repeating that error. With its indiscriminate attacks against civilians and its global recruitment, ISIS poses a direct threat to the United States, and Americans overwhelmingly support military operations to defeat it. But Washington can carry out this mission while limiting its military involvement in the Middle East. It should narrow the focus of its military operations in the region to counterterrorism and the protection of other U.S. national interests, such as preventing genocide, nuclear proliferation, the use of chemical or biological weapons, and interruptions in the oil supply. The United States should not embark on military interventions to bring about a broader transformation of governance in the Middle East, whether through democratizing Iraq or effecting regime change in Iran.

As part of selective retrenchment, the United States should also impose new limits and conditions on its alliances with many authoritarian states. The emerging competition with China's authoritarian model has an unavoidable ideological element. Those who want to defend democratic, open, and free systems will be drawn to the United States, whereas those who do not will be drawn to China. This will put significant pressure on nondemocratic American allies, such as Turkey and the Gulf Arab states, to decide which side to back in diplomatic and geopolitical crises.

The United States regularly allied itself with autocracies during the Cold War and will need to do so again, but only when it is necessary to protect vital U.S. interests. To mount an effective campaign against China in Southeast Asia, for example, Washington may need to develop closer relations with Vietnam, a one-party state. But there will also be times when allying with an authoritarian state has no clear benefit apart from merely racking up the score. In those instances, the United States should avoid repeating one of the worst mistakes of the Cold War: competing for influence in states that do not really matter. For example, if Hungary continues to drift away from democracy, the United States must reassess its alliance with Budapest. When there is a clear rationale for partnering with a distasteful regime, the United States should make the alliance transactional and avoid pretending that they are cooperating based on shared values. With Saudi Arabia, for example, this may mean partnering with the country on counterterrorism and preventing Iranian aggression but refusing to be a party to its bloody intervention in Yemen. And Washington should avoid lending political legitimacy to the regime by appealing to shared values and downplaying differences.

As the United States debates the future of its global role, it must be clear-eyed about what unilateral withdrawal would really mean. Part of the folly of global retrenchers comes from an inability to differentiate the United States' involvement in the Middle East from its involvement in Europe and Asia. Critics are right to be frustrated about U.S. policy in the Middle East. After decades of quixotic attempts to transform the region, Washington finds itself bogged down there, with vast commitments but no clear strategy and few reliable partners. But using the Middle East as a justification for unilateral global withdrawal ignores the tangible benefits of U.S. engagement in Europe and Asia, where there is a clear purpose, strong partners, and shared interests.

Now is not the time for a revolution in U.S. strategy. The United States should continue to play a leading role as a security provider in global affairs. But it can and should be more selective as it safeguards its interests--an approach that would have the added benefit of addressing the concerns that have attracted some people to retrenchment in the first place. The United States must be disciplined enough to understand the distinction between the places and things that really matter and those that do not.

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Caption: Hearts and minds: U.S. soldiers searching farmers in Afghanistan, December 2009

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