

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Number 129 • Jan / Feb 2014



EDITOR *Jacob Heilbrunn*

The National Interest • 1025 Connecticut Avenue, N.W. • Suite 1200 • Washington, D.C. 20036
Phone (202) 467-4884 • Fax (202) 887-5222 • editor@nationalinterest.org

The contents of *The National Interest* are copyrighted. ©2014 The National Interest, Inc.

All rights reserved. Reproduction and distribution of this material is permitted only
with the express written consent of *The National Interest*.

America Unhinged

By John J. Mearsheimer

Since early 2011, political developments in Egypt and Syria have repeatedly captured the attention of the American foreign-policy elite. The Obama administration has tried to guide the turbulent political situation in post-Mubarak Egypt and become increasingly engaged in Syria's bloody civil war. The United States is already helping arm some of the forces fighting against the Assad regime, and President Obama came close to attacking Syria following its use of chemical weapons in August 2013. Washington is now directly involved in the effort to locate and destroy Syria's chemical-weapons stockpiles.

These responses reflect three widespread beliefs about Egypt and Syria. The first is that the two states are of great strategic importance to the United States. There is a deep-seated fear that if the Obama administration does not fix the problems plaguing those countries, serious damage will be done to vital American interests. The second one is that there are compelling moral reasons for U.S. involvement in Syria, mainly because of large-scale civilian deaths. And the third is that the United States possesses the capability to affect Egyptian and Syrian politics in significant and positive ways, in large part by making

sure the right person is in charge in Cairo and Damascus.

Packaged together, such beliefs create a powerful mandate for continuous American involvement in the politics of these two troubled countries.

Anyone paying even cursory attention to U.S. foreign policy in recent decades will recognize that Washington's response to Egypt and Syria is part of a much bigger story. The story is this: America's national-security elites act on the assumption that every nook and cranny of the globe is of great strategic significance and that there are threats to U.S. interests everywhere. Not surprisingly, they live in a constant state of fear. This fearful outlook is reflected in the comments of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, before Congress in February 2012: "I can't impress upon you that in my personal military judgment, formed over thirty-eight years, we are living in the most dangerous time in my lifetime, right now." In February 2013, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that Americans "live in very complex and dangerous times," and the following month Senator James Inhofe said, "I don't remember a time in my life where the world has been more dangerous and the threats more diverse."

These are not anomalous views. A 2009 survey done by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that 69 percent of the Council on Foreign Relations' members believed the world

John J. Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago. He is on the Advisory Council of *The National Interest*.

was more dangerous than—or at least as dangerous as—it was during the Cold War. In short, the elite consensus is that Egypt and Syria are not the only countries Washington has to worry about, although they are among the most pressing problems



at the moment. This grim situation means the United States has a lot of social engineering to carry out, leaving it no choice but to pursue an interventionist foreign policy. In other words, it must pursue a policy of global domination if it hopes to make the world safe for America.

This perspective is influential, widespread—and wrong. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the United States is a remarkably secure country. No great power in world history comes close to enjoying the security it does today. What's more, Egypt and Syria are not vital strategic interests. What happens in those countries is of little importance for American security. This is not to say they are irrelevant but rather that Washington's real interests there are not great enough to justify expending blood

and treasure. Nor is there a compelling moral case for intervening in either country.

Equally important, the United States has little ability to rectify the problems in Egypt and Syria. If anything, intervention is likely to make a bad situation worse.

Consider America's dismal record in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Moreover, it does not matter much who is in charge in Cairo or Damascus. The United States has a rich history of working with leaders of all types, including Communists, fascists, military dictators and traditional monarchs. For all the talk about the need to topple Syria's Bashar al-Assad because he is a ruthless tyrant, Washington was able to live with him—and his equally ruthless father—for more than forty years.

Interfering in countries like Egypt and Syria and turning the world into one big battlefield has significant costs for the United States. The strategic costs are actually not great precisely because the United States is such an extraordinarily secure country. It can pursue foolish policies and still remain the most powerful state on the planet. (This is not to deny that America's interventionist policies are the main cause of its terrorism problem. Nevertheless, terrorism is a minor threat, which is why Washington is free to continue pursuing the policies that helped cause the problem in the first place.)

The pursuit of global domination, however, has other costs that are far more daunting. The economic costs are huge—especially the wars—and there are significant human costs as well. After all, thousands of Americans have died in Afghanistan and Iraq, and many more have suffered egregious injuries that will haunt

them for the rest of their lives. Probably the most serious cost of Washington's interventionist policies is the growth of a national-security state that threatens to undermine the liberal-democratic values that lie at the heart of the American political system.

Given these significant costs, and given that the United States has no vital interests at stake in Egypt and Syria, let alone the capacity for fixing the problems afflicting those countries, it should adopt a hands-off policy toward them. American leaders would do well to honor the principle of self-determination when dealing with Cairo and Damascus, and with many other countries around the world as well.

The United States is an exceptionally secure great power, contrary to the fol-de-rol one frequently hears emanating from America's national-security community. A good way to illustrate this point is to reflect on isolationism, a grand strategy with a rich but controversial history.

Isolationism rests on the assumption that no region of the world outside of the Western Hemisphere is of vital strategic importance to the United States. Isolationists do not argue that America has no interests in the wider world, just that they are not important enough to justify deploying military force to defend them. They are fully in favor of engaging with the rest of the world economically as well as diplomatically, but they view all foreign wars as unnecessary.

I am not an isolationist, but the logic underpinning this grand strategy is not easy to dismiss. Quite the contrary, as President Franklin Roosevelt discovered in the early 1940s, when he had great difficulty countering the isolationists. It is commonplace today to dismiss those isolationists as fools or even crackpots. But that would be a mistake. They were wrong

to think the United States could sit out World War II, but they made a serious case for staying on the sidelines, one that many Americans found compelling. At the heart of the isolationists' worldview is a simple geographical fact: the American homeland is separated from Asia and Europe by two giant moats. No great power can mount an amphibious operation across the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans, and thus no outside power, whether it was Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan, could directly threaten the survival of the United States.

If the case for isolationism was powerful before Pearl Harbor, it is even more compelling today. For starters, the United States has thousands of nuclear weapons, which are the ultimate deterrent and go a long way toward guaranteeing a state's survival. No adversary is going to invade America and threaten its survival, because that opponent would almost certainly end up getting vaporized. In essence, two giant oceans and thousands of nuclear weapons today shield the United States. Moreover, it faces no serious threats in its own neighborhood, as it remains a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere.

Finally, the United States faces no great-power rival of any real consequence. In fact, most strategists I know believe it has been operating in a unipolar world since the Cold War ended, which is another way of saying America is the only great power on the planet; it has no peers. Others believe China and Russia are legitimate great powers and the world is multipolar. Even so, those two great powers are especially weak when compared to the mighty United States. In addition, they have hardly any power-projection capability, which means they cannot seriously threaten the American homeland.

All of this is to say that the United States, which is the most secure great power in world history, has been safer over the past

America's national-security elites act on the assumption that every nook and cranny of the globe is of great strategic significance and that there are threats to U.S. interests everywhere.

twenty-five years than at any other time in its history. General Dempsey's assertion that the present marks the most dangerous era in his lifetime is completely wrong. The world was far more perilous during the Cold War, which witnessed the various Berlin crises, the Cuban missile crisis and the 1973 Yom Kippur War. And it is hard to fathom how Senator Inhofe, who was born one year after Hitler came to power, could think today's world is more dangerous than the first decade of his life.

Am I overlooking the obvious threat that strikes fear into the hearts of so many Americans, which is terrorism? Not at all. Sure, the United States has a terrorism problem. But it is a minor threat. There is no question we fell victim to a spectacular attack on September 11, but it did not cripple the United States in any meaningful way and another attack of that magnitude is highly unlikely in the foreseeable future. Indeed, there has not been a single instance over the past twelve years of a terrorist organization exploding a primitive bomb on American soil, much less striking a major blow. Terrorism—most of it arising from domestic groups—was a much bigger problem in the United States during the 1970s than it has been since the Twin Towers were toppled.

What about the possibility that a terrorist group might obtain a nuclear weapon? Such an occurrence would be a game changer, but the chances of that happening are virtually nil. No nuclear-armed state is going to supply terrorists with a nuclear weapon because it would have no control over how the recipients might use that

weapon.¹ Political turmoil in a nuclear-armed state could in theory allow terrorists to grab a loose nuclear weapon, but the United States already has detailed plans to deal with that highly unlikely contingency.

Terrorists might also try to acquire fissile material and build their own bomb. But that scenario is extremely unlikely as well: there are significant obstacles to getting enough material and even bigger obstacles to building a bomb and then delivering it. More generally, virtually every country has a profound interest in making sure no terrorist group acquires a nuclear weapon, because they cannot be sure they will not be the target of a nuclear attack, either by the terrorists or another country the terrorists strike. Nuclear terrorism, in short, is not a serious threat. And to the extent that we should worry about it, the main remedy is to encourage and help other states to place nuclear materials in highly secure custody.

Contrary to what isolationists think, there are three regions of the world—Europe, Northeast Asia and the Persian Gulf—that are indeed of vital strategic importance to the United States. Of course, Europe and Northeast Asia are important because the world's other great powers are located in those regions, and they are the only states that might acquire the capability to threaten the United States in a serious way.

¹ Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "Why States Won't Give Nuclear Weapons to Terrorists," *International Security* 38, no. 1 (2013).

One might counter that they still cannot attack across the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans and reach the shores of the United States. True, but if a distant great power were to dominate Asia or Europe the way America dominates the Western Hemisphere, it would then be free to roam around the globe and form alliances with countries in the Western Hemisphere that have an adversarial relationship with the United States. In that circumstance, the stopping power of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans would be far less effective. Thus, American policy makers have a deep-seated interest in preventing another great power from achieving regional hegemony in Asia or Europe.

The Persian Gulf is strategically important because it produces roughly 30 percent of the world's oil, and it holds about 55 percent of the world's crude-oil reserves. If the flow of oil from that region were stopped or even severely curtailed for a substantial period of time, it would have a devastating effect on the world economy. Therefore, the United States has good reason to ensure that oil flows freely out of the Gulf, which in practice means preventing any single country from controlling all of that critical resource. Most oil-producing states will keep pumping and selling their oil as long as they are free to do so, because they depend on the revenues. It is in America's interest to keep them that way, which means there can be no regional hegemon in the Gulf, as well as Asia and Europe.

To be clear, only the oil-producing states of the Persian Gulf are of marked strategic importance to the United States, not every country in the broader Middle East. In particular, Washington should be concerned about the fate of Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, because it wants to make sure their oil flows uninterrupted into world markets. Middle

Eastern states that do not have much oil are of little strategic significance to the United States. They include Egypt and Syria, as well as Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen. Thus, it makes little sense for Americans to worry much about what is happening in Egypt and Syria, much less countenance military intervention in those countries. In short, what happens in Cairo and Damascus has little effect on American security.

It is apparent from the discourse in the American foreign-policy establishment, as well as the Obama administration's behavior, that my views about the strategic importance of Egypt and Syria are at odds with mainstream thinking. So let us consider in more detail how those two countries might affect U.S. security.

Egypt and Syria are weak countries by any meaningful measure of power. Both have small and feeble economies, and hardly any oil or other natural resources that might make them rich like Kuwait or Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, neither Egypt nor Syria has ever had a formidable military, even when the Soviet Union provided them with sophisticated military equipment during the Cold War. Neither was a serious threat to its neighbors, especially Israel. Remember that Israel fought major wars against Egypt in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973, and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) clobbered the Egyptian army in each instance. Syria fought against the IDF in 1948, 1967 and 1973, and it too suffered humiliating defeats at the hands of the Israelis.

Egypt and Israel made peace after the 1973 war, but Israel and Syria remain enemies. Nevertheless, every time there has been a possibility the two sides might become embroiled in a war—during the 2006 war in Lebanon, for example—the Syrians have gone to great lengths to avoid a fight. The Syrians fully understand they

could not hold their own against the IDF. Of course, the recent turmoil and conflict in Egypt and Syria have weakened those two countries further. Indeed, Israel is now so confident of its military superiority over its Arab neighbors that it is actually reducing its conventional forces.

Most importantly for the issue at hand, neither the Egyptian nor the Syrian military is a serious threat to the American homeland or even to U.S. forces stationed in the Persian Gulf. And there is no reason to think that situation will change in the foreseeable future. Given that Egypt and Syria have little economic or military power and hardly any oil, advocates of global domination rely on a variety of other claims to make the case that they are core American interests.

One argument is that the United States should care greatly about Egypt because it controls the Suez Canal. Roughly 8 percent of global seaborne trade and 4.5 percent of world oil supplies travel through that passageway. Moreover, the U.S. Navy uses the canal to move ships from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf. Thus, if Egypt were to close the canal, it would damage the international economy and complicate American efforts to project power into the strategically important Gulf.

This is unpersuasive. If Egypt closed the Suez Canal, it would not seriously hurt the international economy. Ships would be rerouted, mainly around the southern tip of Africa, and oil from the Middle East would be distributed to the recipient countries in different ways. Furthermore, Egypt would pay a significant economic price if it shut down the canal, which is its third-largest source of revenue and is sometimes referred to as an “economic lifeline.” Not only would Cairo lose the money generated by that passageway, but it would also risk economic and political retaliation by the countries hurt by the closing. It is worth

noting that the canal was closed from 1967 to 1975 and the international economy experienced no serious damage.

The threat of preventing the U.S. Navy from reaching the Persian Gulf by shutting the canal is an empty one, because American ships can reach the Gulf through the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. It might be more convenient for the United States to send some ships bound for the Gulf through the canal, but it is hardly essential for projecting power into that region.

One can discern four arguments in the public discourse about why Syria might be a vital American interest. Some maintain that toppling Assad is important because it would deliver a staggering blow to Hezbollah and especially Iran, since they are both staunch supporters of the Assad regime. Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah put the point succinctly in the summer of 2011: “Nothing would weaken Iran more than losing Syria.” A few months later, Tom Donilon, President Obama’s national-security adviser, explained that the “end of the Assad regime would constitute Iran’s greatest setback in the region yet—a strategic blow that will further shift the balance of power in the region against Iran.”

This deep concern about Iran is motivated by the belief that its influence in the Middle East has grown significantly and that it is bent on achieving regional hegemony. Its pursuit of nuclear weapons, so the argument goes, is part of Tehran’s drive to dominate the Middle East.

Terrorism is the basis of a second argument for treating Syria as a fundamental strategic interest. The claim is not only that Syria supports terrorist organizations like Hezbollah, but also that Al Qaeda and other groups hostile to the United States now operate in Syria. Thus, as two hawkish commentators writing



in the *New York Times* put it, the United States could intervene in Syria and “create a bulwark against extremist groups like Al Qaeda, which are present and are seeking safe havens in ungoverned corners of Syria.” Toppling Assad would also seriously weaken Hezbollah, which is heavily dependent on Syria as well as Iran for its survival.

Another line of argument is that the United States must be intensely involved in Syria because of the danger that its raging civil war will spill over into neighboring countries, thus causing a wider conflict that will threaten American interests in the region. “The longer the war,” the *Wall Street Journal* argues, “the graver the risks to America’s allies.”

Finally, there is the claim that Syria matters greatly because America’s credibility is at stake. Specifically, President Obama said in August 2012 that Syria would be crossing a “red line” if it used chemical weapons against the rebels. The implication was that the United States would respond with military force if that happened.

According to the White House, Assad used chemical weapons on August 21, 2013, and killed 1,429 civilians. This tragic event, so the argument goes, was not only a clear violation of a fundamental norm, but it also put U.S. credibility on the line.

This matter is deemed especially important because the fact that Obama did not punish Syria for crossing his red line makes his threat to attack Iran if it moves to acquire nuclear weapons look hollow.

None of these arguments are convincing. There is no question that America’s disastrous war in Iraq strengthened Iran’s position in the Middle East, mainly by bringing a Shia-dominated government to power in Baghdad. But Iran is nowhere close to having the capability to become a hegemon in the Gulf. It does not have formidable conventional forces, and nobody worries much about it conquering any of its neighbors, especially because the United States would intervene to stop it.

Nor is it clear that Tehran is pursuing nuclear weapons. The consensus opinion in the American intelligence community is that it is not. But even if that judgment proves wrong and Iran acquires a nuclear arsenal, it could not use that capability to dominate the Persian Gulf. Nuclear weapons provide states with little offensive capability and thus are ill suited for spreading Iran’s influence in its neighborhood. Furthermore, both Israel and the United States have nuclear weapons and would never tolerate Iran achieving regional hegemony. Nor would

Saudi Arabia or any other Arab state, which means Iran would face a formidable balancing coalition if it tried to rule the Gulf.

Finally, no matter how powerful one thinks Iran is today, losing in Syria is not going to diminish its economic or military power in any meaningful way, although it will curtail its regional influence somewhat. But that outcome has two possible consequences for the United States, neither of which is good. One is that Tehran is likely to go to great lengths to keep Assad in power, complicating Washington's efforts to depose the Syrian leader. However, if Iran does lose in Syria and thinks it is America's next target for regime change, its incentive to acquire a nuclear deterrent will increase. Thus, toppling Assad is likely to make Iranian nuclear weapons more, not less, likely.

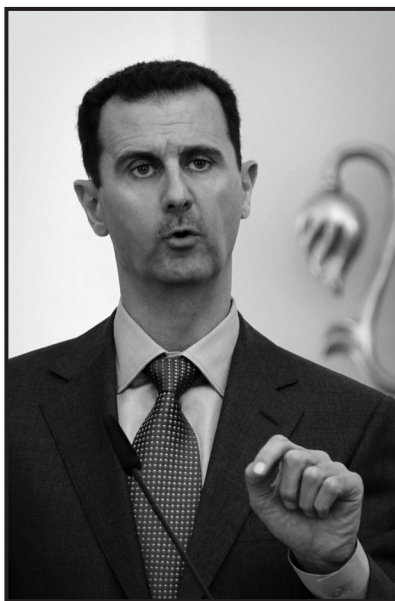
The claim that the United States should treat Syria as a core strategic interest because it is a hotbed for terrorism also suffers from a number of flaws. For one thing, terrorism is not a serious enough threat to justify intervening in Syria, especially with military force. Moreover, intervening in countries like Syria is precisely what helps trigger the terrorism problem. Remember that the United States faced no terrorism problem from Syria before the Obama administration threw its weight behind the effort to oust Assad from power. Indeed, Syria helped the United States deal with its terrorism problem after

September 11. It gave Washington valuable intelligence about Al Qaeda—information that helped stymie attacks on American targets in Bahrain and Canada—and it was deeply involved in the Bush administration's program of extraordinary rendition. According to the *New Yorker's* Jane Mayer, it was one of the "most common destinations for rendered suspects."

By backing the campaign against Assad, the Obama administration has helped turn Syria into a haven for terrorist groups. In fact, groups that loathe the United States dominate the armed opposition to Assad. Moreover, many Western governments now worry because their citizens are flocking to Syria and joining the rebels. The apprehension is that they will become radicalized and return home as full-blown terrorists. Intervening in Syria will just make the terrorism problem there worse, unless, of course, Washington helps Assad defeat the rebels and return to the status quo

ante. That is unlikely to happen, however, because Obama is committed to arming the rebels.

But backing the rebels certainly does not solve the terrorism problem, as the most powerful groups are comprised of jihadists who hate America. Furthermore, if the United States gets more deeply involved in the conflict, the actors supporting Assad—Hezbollah, Iran and Russia—are likely to up the ante themselves, increasing the prospect the war will drag on for the



Egypt and Syria are not vital strategic interests. What happens in those countries is of little importance for American security.

foreseeable future. And the longer the civil war lasts, the stronger the jihadists will become within the opposition forces.

If nothing else, one might argue that removing Assad from power would deliver a devastating blow to Hezbollah, which is supported by Syria as well as Iran. The first problem with this claim is that the United States is not a mortal enemy of Hezbollah and not in its crosshairs. Washington should not give it any incentive to target the United States. Furthermore, even if the flow of Iranian and Syrian arms to Hezbollah were cut off, it would remain a powerful force in Lebanon and the broader region, as it has deep roots and enjoys substantial support among important segments of Lebanese society. Moreover, the flow of arms from Iran and Syria to Hezbollah would eventually start up again, because no matter who rules in Damascus, it is in their interest to support Hezbollah. That militant organization directly threatens Israel's northern border, which provides Syria with the only leverage it has for getting the Golan Heights back from Israel.

What about the claim that the United States should intervene in Syria's civil war to prevent it from becoming a regional conflict? It's worth noting that the Obama administration helped precipitate this problem by attempting to remove Assad and failing, which helped exacerbate the ongoing civil war. Furthermore, if America gets more involved in the conflict, Hezbollah, Iran and Russia are likely to increase their support for Assad, which would increase the prospect that the war would spill over into neighboring

countries. In other words, further American intervention would probably help spread the fire, not contain it.

In theory, the United States could solve this contagion problem by invading and occupying Syria, much the way it did in Iraq between 2003 and 2011. Thankfully, there is zero chance that will happen. Thus, the best strategy for the Obama administration is to pursue a diplomatic solution.

But even if diplomacy fails and the war spreads beyond Syria's borders, it would not undermine American security in any meaningful way, as it would not lead to a single country dominating the Gulf and its oil. Besides, every oil-producing country has powerful incentives to sell its oil and generate revenue, whether it is embroiled in a conflict or not.

Lastly, there is the argument that American credibility is on the line in Syria and thus the United States must remain deeply involved in that country's politics. To be sure, credibility would not even be an issue if President Obama had not foolishly drawn a red line over Syrian use of chemical weapons. One might counter that the president had no choice but to rule the use of chemical weapons out of bounds, because they are especially heinous weapons and there is a powerful norm against using them.

These counterarguments are not compelling. Despite all the hyperbole surrounding chemical weapons, they are not weapons of mass destruction. They are certainly not in the same category as nuclear weapons. Israel, after all, has been willing

to live with Syrian chemical weapons for many years, while it has been adamant that it will not tolerate Iranian or Syrian nuclear weapons.

Also, consider the history of civilian casualties over the course of Syria's civil war. As noted above, the United States estimates that 1,429 civilians were killed in the August 21 gas attacks, which is a considerably higher number than the estimates of Britain, France and Doctors Without Borders, all of which put the death toll under four hundred. Regardless of the exact number, bombs and bullets killed roughly forty thousand Syrian noncombatants before the recent gassing, yet those many civilian deaths did not prompt the White House to intervene in Syria.

Is the crucial difference that chemical weapons cause a particularly gruesome death when compared to bombs and bullets? This contention dovetails with the White House's campaign to purvey pictures of Syrians dying or dead from chemical weapons. There is no meaningful difference, however, between killing people with bombs and bullets versus gas.

Regarding the norm against using chemical weapons, it surely is not a powerful one. After all, no country, save for France and the United States, was willing to go to war against Syria this past summer when it used gas against the rebels. And it is hard to argue it is a powerful norm for most Americans, who want no part of a military strike on Syria.

And while Obama may think the norm is formidable, remember that in 1988, when Iran appeared to be on the verge of defeating Iraq in their long and bloody war, the Reagan administration came to the aid of Saddam Hussein and helped his military use chemical weapons—including the lethal nerve agent, sarin—to stymie the Iranians on the battlefield. Washington provided Iraq with information on the location of

Iran's troops, which allowed Iraqi chemical weapons to be effectively dumped on them. And when Saddam gassed Iraqi Kurds at Halabja in March 1988, the U.S. government refrained from blaming him, just as it had throughout the war whenever Iraq used chemical weapons, which it did a number of times.

There is actually a good chance the Obama administration will take the credibility problem off the table with diplomacy. It appears that the Russians and the Americans—working through the UN—may succeed in destroying Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons. If that happens, Obama should declare victory and then stay out of Syrian politics. But if that effort fails and Assad keeps some chemical weapons, the president will once again be urged to consider using military force against Syria to uphold American credibility. In that event, the United States should not attack Syria; indeed, the smart policy would be for Obama to ignore the fact that he drew a line in the sand and move toward a noninterventionist policy toward Syria. This approach makes sense for a variety of reasons.

First, the credibility problem is greatly overrated. As Daryl G. Press notes in his important book, *Calculating Credibility*, when a country backs down in a crisis, its credibility in subsequent crises is not reduced. "A country's credibility, at least during crises," he writes, "is driven not by its past behavior but rather by power and interests."² Thus, the fact that America suffered a humiliating defeat in the Vietnam War did not lead Moscow to think that the U.S. commitment to defend Western Europe was not credible.

So even if the United States fails to

² Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

enforce the norm against the use of chemical weapons in Syria, there is no good reason to think the leadership in Tehran will conclude Washington is not serious about preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. After all, American policy makers have gone to enormous lengths over the past decade to make clear that a nuclear Iran is unacceptable.

Second, the White House has no viable strategy for removing Assad from power or for eliminating his chemical weapons with force. Actually, it is unclear how committed Obama is to unseating the Syrian leader, given that jihadists dominate the opposition. Moreover, the president is unwilling to punish the Assad regime with sustained and large-scale strikes for fear of getting dragged into the conflict. What this means, in essence, is that even if one believes some damage will be done to America's credibility by walking away from Syria, it is better to pay that small price rather than engage in fruitless if not dangerous military strikes.

Third, if the United States uses military force against Syria and gets even more deeply enmeshed in that country, it would reduce the likelihood Washington would use force against Iran. It is clear from the recent debate about striking Syria that the American public is tired of war. But if the United States did jump into the fight, even with airpower alone, it would surely make the American people even more reluctant to begin another war against Iran. For all these reasons, American leaders should pay little attention to the so-called credibility

problem Obama created when he unwisely drew a red line over Syrian use of chemical weapons.

In sum, no vital American interests are at stake in either Egypt or Syria. Thus, there is no compelling strategic rationale for intervening in their politics. Indeed, it appears that intervention does more harm than good to America's security interests.

One might concede this point, but argue instead that moral considerations demand deep American involvement in Egypt and Syria—and other countries as well—to eliminate their ruling autocrats. The underlying logic is that these strongmen deny their people basic human rights and are likely to kill innocent civilians. The ultimate goal, unsurprisingly, is to promote democracy in those countries, not only for human-rights reasons, but also because democratic regimes are likely to be friendly to America.



This line of thinking is not convincing; in fact, it is dangerous. The United States should not be the world's policeman, in part because it should respect the principle of self-determination and allow countries to decide their own political fate. For good

The United States, which is the most secure great power in world history, has been safer over the past twenty-five years than at any other time in its history.

reason, almost every American recoils at the idea of another country interfering in their political life; they should realize other peoples feel the same way about U.S. interference in their domestic affairs. What is sauce for the goose should be sauce for the gander.

Furthermore, the United States would be deeply involved in the politics of countries all across the globe if it pursued this ambitious policy. After all, there will never be a shortage of nondemocratic regimes to reform, and sometimes there will be the temptation to use the sword to achieve that end. Moreover, the United States has an abysmal track record when it comes to social engineering of this sort. Remember that the Bush Doctrine, which crashed and burned in Iraq, was supposed to facilitate the spread of democracy across the Middle East. Thus, if Washington pursues a policy of toppling authoritarian regimes and promoting democracy, there will be no end to our crusading but few successes along the way.

Another moral argument says the United States should intervene in the Syrian civil war because it is a humanitarian disaster. Many thousands of civilians have died, and the Assad regime has gone so far as to murder people with poison gas. It is deeply regrettable that civilians are dying in Syria, but intervention still makes little sense. There is no compelling rationale for entering the war and no viable strategy for ending it. If anything, American entry into the conflict is likely to prolong the war and increase the suffering.

Syria is in the midst of a brutal civil war, and such conflicts invariably involve

large numbers of civilian casualties. That is especially true in cases like Syria, where there are sharp ethnic and religious differences, and where the fighting often takes place in urban areas, increasing the prospects of collateral damage.

Regardless, what is happening in Syria is not genocide or anything close to the systematic murdering of a particular group. Proponents of intervention are fond of portraying Assad as a modern-day version of Hitler and arguing this is the West's "Munich moment," implying he will engage in mass murder if not dealt with immediately. This is hyperbole of the worst kind. Assad is certainly a ruthless dictator, but he has done nothing that would put him in the same class as Hitler, who murdered more than twenty million civilians in the course of a ruthless campaign of territorial expansion, and would have murdered many millions more had he won World War II. As noted, roughly forty thousand civilians have died in the Syrian civil war, and the rebels have killed many of the victims.

Finally, Assad's use of chemical weapons hardly justifies intervention on moral grounds. Those weapons are responsible for a small percentage of the civilian deaths in Syria. Moreover, the claim that killing people with gas is more gruesome and horrible than killing them with shrapnel is unpersuasive.

Not only is there no moral rationale for intervention, but the United States also has no strategy for ending the war. Even when Obama was threatening to bomb Syria this past summer, he emphasized that the

strikes would be limited—"unbelievably small," according to Secretary of State John Kerry—and not designed either to topple Assad or end the civil war. This restricted-bombing strategy is certainly at odds with the claim that Assad is a contemporary version of Hitler who must be dealt with immediately. Of course, the United States is now involved in negotiations that aim to get rid of Assad's chemical weapons, but not him. In fact, if they succeed, his prospects for staying in power will increase. More important for the point at hand, those negotiations are not aimed at terminating the conflict.

It is widely believed in the American national-security establishment that Washington has the capacity to fix the problems that plague countries like Egypt and Syria and that the key to success is to turn those countries into democracies.

This is certainly not true in Syria. The United States has no viable strategy for ending the conflict there, much less turning Syria into a democracy. Indeed, it seems clear that the Obama administration made a fundamental mistake when it opted to try to remove Assad. Washington should have stayed out of Syria's business and let the Syrian people determine their own political fate, whatever the result.

The same logic applies to Egypt, whose politics the Obama administration has been trying to micromanage since protests against then president Hosni Mubarak broke out in January 2011. As the protests gained momentum, the United States stepped in and helped oust him from power. Obama then welcomed Egypt's move toward democracy and supported its newly elected government, even though the Muslim Brotherhood dominated it.

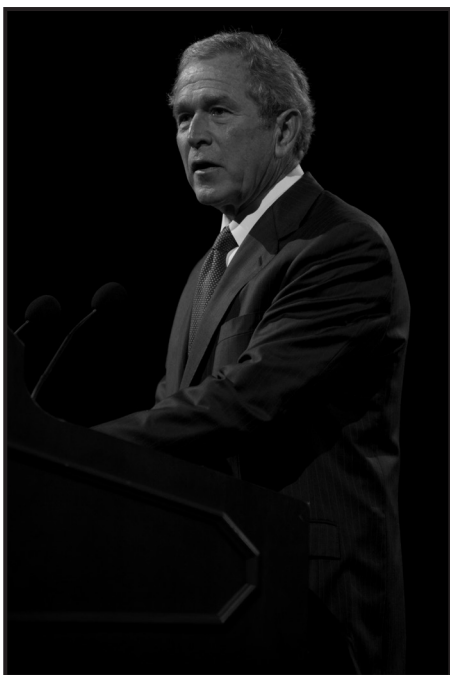
After a mere one year in office, President Mohamed Morsi, who was a member of the Brotherhood, came under tremendous

pressure to resign from the Egyptian military and a large slice of the public. The Obama administration, which was never enthusiastic about a Morsi presidency, stepped into this messy situation and facilitated his overthrow. He was replaced by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, a strongman in the Mubarak tradition.

In taking this step, the United States was helping foster a coup against a democratically elected leader who was not a threat to the United States. The new Egyptian government then turned against the Brotherhood, killing over a thousand people and putting Morsi in jail. The Obama administration lamely tried to prevent this bloody crackdown but failed. Moreover, it has cut only a small portion of the \$1.5 billion in aid the United States gives Egypt each year, even though U.S. law mandates that most foreign aid be cut to any country "whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup or decree."

The end result of meddling in Egypt's politics over the past three years is that the United States is even more widely despised in that country than it was before (which is saying something). The Brotherhood and its allies loathe America for helping to overthrow Morsi and then standing by while their members were murdered. The military and many civilians dislike the United States for having supported the Brotherhood when it was in power. On top of all that, the Obama administration ended up helping remove one autocrat only to replace him with another, and in the process helped overthrow a legitimately elected leader.

Perhaps Obama mishandled the situation in Egypt and should have employed a different strategy. Yet it is hard to see what Washington could have done differently in Egypt (or Syria) that would have produced a happy ending.



To take this a step further, what happened in those two countries is part of a bigger picture that is filled with failed attempts at social engineering in the Arab and Islamic world. Just look at America's track record since September 11. The United States has intervened with force and overthrown regimes in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. In each case, American policy makers thought they could help create a stable democracy that would be friendly to the United States. They failed in all three cases. Serious instability is the order of the day in each of those countries, and although the reigning governments in Baghdad, Kabul and Tripoli are not overtly hostile to the United States, they are hardly friendly and cooperative.

So, if you look at America's performance over the past twelve years in Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Libya and Syria, it is batting 0 for 5. Washington seems to have an uncanny ability to take a bad situation and make it worse. This abysmal record

is actually not surprising, as doing large-scale social engineering in any society is an enormously complicated and difficult task. And the circumstances the United States faces when it intervenes abroad are especially daunting. After all, it invariably intervenes in countries about which it knows little and where its presence is likely to generate resentment sooner rather than later. Furthermore, those places are usually riven with factions and are either in the midst of conflict or likely to be in turmoil once the government is toppled.

Should the United States just accept this grim reality and do its best to make things work in places like Egypt and Syria? No. These countries are of little strategic importance to the United States, and it matters little who is in charge in Cairo or Damascus. But even if the fate of those countries did have serious consequences for American security—which is true of the major oil-producing states in the Gulf—it still would not matter much who governed them.

The United States has a long history of working with political leaders of all kinds. In fact, it worked closely with two of the greatest mass murderers of modern times: Joseph Stalin during World War II and Mao Zedong during the latter part of the Cold War. Furthermore, Washington does not always get along well with elected leaders, which is why the United States has an extensive record of overthrowing democratic leaders it does not trust: Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran (1953), Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala (1954) and Salvador Allende in Chile (1973), just to name a few.

These were all wrongheaded moves, however, because Washington could have worked with those elected leaders, just as it has worked with autocrats of all stripes. There is no doubt leaders sometimes come to power filled with revolutionary zeal and

If you look at America's performance over the past twelve years in Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Libya and Syria, it is batting 0 for 5.

hostility toward the United States. But that fervor wears off once those leaders confront the realities of exercising power inside and outside of their countries' borders. Plus, the United States is enormously powerful, and almost always has substantial leverage in its dealings with other countries. *Ceteris paribus*, it is best for a foreign leader to get along with Uncle Sam; purposely picking a fight rarely makes sense. None of this is to deny that America's interests sometimes clash with those of other countries. But that does not mean the leadership on either side is responsible for the rivalry in those cases.

In sum, the best approach for the United States is not to intervene in other countries to help influence what kind of political system they have or who governs them. The smart strategy is to let other peoples decide their own political fate, and then use carrots and sticks to foster relations that serve America's interests.

What makes America's penchant for intervening in places like Egypt and Syria so disturbing is not just that it makes little strategic sense or that the United States invariably fails to achieve its goals. The costs are also enormous, especially the economic and human costs, as well as the damage it does to the country's liberal-democratic institutions.

The strategic costs of pursuing global dominance are actually not substantial. As foolish as it is for Washington to intervene in the politics of countries like Egypt and Syria, the mess it makes does not diminish American security in any meaningful way. The United States is a remarkably safe

country, which is what allows it to behave foolishly without jeopardizing its security. The "unipolar moment," coupled with America's geographical location and nuclear arsenal, creates a permissive environment for irresponsible behavior, which its leaders have been quick to exploit. The one notable strategic cost of these interventionist policies is the terrorism problem. But that threat is not of great significance, which is why the United States is able to pursue the same policies that help cause this problem in the first place.

Unlike the strategic costs, the economic costs of global dominance have been enormous. For starters, the United States has had to maintain a huge and sophisticated military with bases all over the world so that it can intervene anywhere on the planet. Not surprisingly, its defense budget dwarfs that of any other country; in 2012, for example, the United States spent more on defense (\$682 billion) than the next ten countries combined (\$652 billion). That enormous defense budget accounts for roughly 20 percent of U.S. government spending, which is almost as much as it spends on Social Security and about the same amount it spends on Medicare and Medicaid put together. And then there are the various wars America has fought since 2001, which will probably end up costing a staggering \$4–6 trillion.

The enormous amount of money spent on defense since September 11 has contributed significantly to America's huge national debt, which is now well over \$16 trillion. That debt has been a major drag on the American economy and promises

to be so for a long time to come. There are also major opportunity costs associated with all the money spent pursuing global dominance. Some of the hundreds of billions of dollars wasted on preparing for and fighting unnecessary wars could have been spent instead on education, public health and transportation infrastructure, just to name a few areas on the home front where additional resources would have made the United States a more prosperous and livable country.

Then there are the human costs of these imperial policies, and here the main concern is the casualties from the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Unlike the economic costs, which affect virtually every American, the human costs are borne by a narrow slice of American society. Because the United States has an all-volunteer force, only about 0.5 percent of the population serves in the military. Contrast that figure with World War II, where more than 12 percent of the population was in uniform. That means the overwhelming majority of Americans who have been eligible to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq have never put on a uniform, much less served in combat.

The fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq has exacted a huge price from the U.S. military—especially the army and the Marines. More than 6,700 soldiers have been killed so far in those two conflicts, and over fifty thousand have been wounded in action, about 22 percent with traumatic brain injuries. Furthermore, as always happens in war, many of the combatants are psychological casualties, as they return home with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression. The Department of Veterans Affairs reported in the fall of 2012 that more than 247,000 veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars have been diagnosed with PTSD. Many of those soldiers have served multiple combat tours.

It is hardly surprising that the suicide

rate in the U.S. military increased by 80 percent from 2002 to 2009, while the civilian rate increased only 15 percent. And in 2009, veterans of Iraq were twice as likely to be unemployed as the typical American. On top of all that, returning war veterans are roughly four times more likely to face family-related problems like divorce, domestic violence and child abuse than those who stayed out of harm's way. In short, the small segment of U.S. society that has fought in these recent wars has paid a huge price for its service, while the vast majority of Americans have stayed out of uniform and paid no price at all.

Proponents of the Iraq War like to claim that these human costs are deeply regrettable, but that it is a price that the United States had to pay in the wake of September 11. But Iraq was an unnecessary war: Saddam did not have weapons of mass destruction, and even if he did, he could have been contained, just as the United States contained the Soviet Union during the Cold War.³ It was necessary to topple the Taliban in the fall of 2001. But once that goal was achieved—which happened quickly and with few American deaths—the United States should have left Afghanistan and stayed out. Instead, both the Bush and Obama administrations upped the ante in Afghanistan, in what soon became another unnecessary war.

Second, both of these wars are lost causes. The Iraq that the U.S. military left behind after a decade of occupation is teetering on the brink of civil war, and anger at the United States runs deep among its people as well as its leaders. In Afghanistan, a corrupt and incompetent leader has consistently undermined American efforts to pacify and stabilize that country. There is little doubt

³ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "An Unnecessary War," *Foreign Policy*, January-February 2003.

that when U.S. troops finally leave, there will be fighting across Afghanistan and the Taliban will emerge as the most powerful force in the land. The herculean efforts of the American military in both Afghanistan and Iraq have been in vain.

The final reason to think these wars were not worth fighting is that most Americans felt that way. Consider Iraq. According to polling by ABC News and the *Washington Post*, “By February 2004, just short of a year after it started, 50 percent of Americans said the war was not worth fighting; it reached a majority that June and stayed there, with just three exceptions, in 52 ABC/*Post* polls across the ensuing nine years.” When the fighting in Iraq was at its worst in April 2007, 66 percent said the war was not worth fighting. Likewise, in December 2009, as Obama ordered his troop surge into Afghanistan, a Pew poll found that only 32 percent of Americans supported this decision. Moreover, only 56 percent of the public thought the initial decision to invade Afghanistan in 2001 had been correct.

Perhaps the greatest cost of a strategy that calls for intervening in countries like Egypt and Syria is the damage it does to the political fabric of American society. In particular, individual rights and the rule of law will not fare well in a country that maintains a large and powerful military and is addicted to fighting wars. It is unsurprising, given the United States has been at war for two out of every three years since the Cold War ended, that a recent Gallup poll found that 71 percent of Americans think



the signers of the Declaration of Independence would be disappointed in how the United States has turned out. The number was 42 percent in 2001.

One harmful consequence of America's interventionist foreign policy is that it creates numerous situations where presidents and their lieutenants have a powerful incentive to lie, or at least distort the truth, when talking to the public. This is due in part to the fact that the United States is an unusually secure country and thus it is difficult to get Americans to support unnecessary wars. This is why the Bush administration had to wage a deception campaign in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War. It also accounts for why U.S. policy makers frequently equate adversaries like Assad and Saddam with Hitler, even though there is no basis for doing so.

Lying is driven in some cases by the government's need to hide illegal or constitutionally suspect activities from its citizenry. For example, James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, was asked in congressional testimony on March 12, 2013: “Does the NSA collect any type

of data at all on millions or hundreds of millions of Americans?” He answered, “No.” It quickly became apparent that he was lying, which he admitted when he wrote to Congress several months later: “My response was clearly erroneous—for which I apologize.” Later, he said that he responded to that question in the “least untruthful” manner possible. Although lying to Congress is a felony, Clapper has not been charged and remains in his position today.

One could easily point to other cases where policy makers—including President Obama—have been less than honest with the American people. Pervasive obfuscating and lying, however, inevitably creates a poisonous culture of dishonesty, which can gravely damage any body politic, but especially a democracy. Not only does lying make it difficult for citizens to make informed choices when they vote on candidates and issues, but it also undermines the policy-making process, because government officials cannot trust each other, and that greatly increases the transaction costs of doing business. Furthermore, the rule of law is undermined in a world where distorting the truth is commonplace. There has to be a substantial amount of honesty and trust in public life for any legal system to work effectively. Finally, if lying is pervasive in a democracy, it might alienate the public to the point where it loses faith in democratic government.

Another consequence of America’s policy of global dominance is that the government inevitably violates the individual rights that are at the core of a liberal society and tramples the rule of law as well. The taproot of the problem is that a democracy constantly preparing for and fighting wars, as well as extolling the virtues of using force, will eventually transform itself into a national-security state. Specifically, the

executive will become especially powerful at the expense of the legislative and judicial branches of government. Traditional checks and balances will matter little, resulting in an imperial presidency.

An unchecked executive, however, does not simply accumulate great power. It also engages in behavior that involves breaking the law or operating in secrecy, largely to avoid public scrutiny and judicial or congressional review. In this regard, the checks and balances built into the U.S. system encourage executives to act in secret, because that may be the only way to get things done quickly. Leaders do not act this way because they are evil, but because they believe the country’s security demands it. In the tradeoff between security and civil liberties, they almost always come down on the side of security. After all, a country’s highest goal has to be its survival, because if it does not continue it cannot pursue its other goals. Given the exaggerated fear of foreign threats that permeates the American national-security establishment, it is unsurprising that Presidents Bush and Obama have pursued policies that endanger liberal democracy at home.

This tendency toward law breaking and the violation of individual rights explains in part why the executive has a deep affection for secrecy. Both the Bush and Obama administrations engaged in illegal or at least questionable surveillance of American citizens, which they wanted to hide from the public, Congress and the judiciary. This is one reason Obama has seemed so determined to severely punish Chelsea (formerly Bradley) Manning and Edward Snowden, and more generally why he has gone to war against reporters and whistle-blowers with unprecedented fervor. The president boasts that he leads “the most transparent administration in history.” If true, it is because of the reporters and

A democracy constantly preparing for and fighting wars, as well as extolling the virtues of using force, will eventually transform itself into a national-security state.

whistle-blowers, not Obama, who is deeply committed to government secrecy.

Let us consider in more detail how the national-security state threatens America's liberal political order. Three stories are in order, the first of which involves the right to privacy as it relates to the Fourth Amendment's warrant requirements. Generally speaking, the government cannot gather information on American citizens without a warrant or other judicial authorization. Normally, there must be probable cause to think an individual is engaging in illegal activity before obtaining a search warrant. Thus, even in cases where the government thinks someone is dangerous or behaving unlawfully, it typically cannot act without judicial approval.

There is no question the Bush administration was engaged in warrantless surveillance of American citizens from shortly after September 11 until January 2007. But that is not the end of the story. We now know, thanks to Edward Snowden, that the government—mainly the NSA—also searches and stores vast amounts of emails and text-based messages. While limited by law to international communications for foreign intelligence purposes, the NSA nevertheless collected the communications of American citizens that were entirely domestic. The government also regularly collects telephone records of millions of Americans, and keeps track of “telephony metadata” that includes the phone numbers of parties to a call, its duration, location and time. It is hard to disagree with Senator Ron Wyden's

comment that “the government's authority to collect information on law-abiding American citizens is essentially limitless.”

The government oftentimes gets a warrant from a secret court known as the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, or the FISA court. But there are significant transparency and credibility problems with this process. First, this court is a virtual rubber stamp for the government and its intelligence agencies. Since 1979, the FISA court has received about thirty-four thousand requests to conduct electronic surveillance within the United States. It has denied the government's request in only eleven of those cases. Second, it is virtually impossible to challenge FISA court rulings, not only because they are secret, but also because there is no party to the proceedings besides the government. Third, as the recent declassification of certain FISA court opinions reveals, the government often pays little heed to the court's warnings unless forced to do so.

The Obama administration, not surprisingly, initially claimed that the NSA's spying played a key role in thwarting fifty-four terrorist plots against the United States, implying it violated the Fourth Amendment for good reason. This was a lie, however. General Keith Alexander, the NSA director, eventually admitted to Congress that he could claim only one success, and that involved catching a Somali immigrant and three cohorts living in San Diego who had sent \$8,500 to a terrorist group in Somalia.

The second story concerns due process, which lies at the very core of America's

constitutional protections and is the backbone of what is considered the rule of law. It is no exaggeration to say the traditional notion of due process has become laughable as it applies to so-called enemy combatants in the war on terror. When the United States began sweeping up suspected terrorists in Afghanistan and elsewhere after September 11, the Bush administration created a legal black hole at Guantánamo Bay, and strongly resisted the detainees' efforts to obtain due process.

Notwithstanding President Obama's efforts to close Guantánamo, it remains open and continues to be a due-process quagmire. For example, of the 164 individuals still imprisoned at Guantánamo, eighty-four were cleared for release in 2009 but remain imprisoned. There are another forty-six prisoners the government cannot prosecute because of insufficient evidence, but it refuses to release them because they are considered to be security threats to the United States. This arbitrary and unprecedented policy of indefinite detention is a blatant violation of traditional American notions of due process.

Worse yet, the Bush administration devised the infamous policy of extraordinary rendition, where high-value prisoners were sent to countries with terrible human-rights records to be tortured and interrogated. And it appears that the CIA itself tortured prisoners at its so-called black sites in Europe, as well as at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan and Abu Ghraib in Iraq. This behavior clearly violates American and international law, which both forbid torture.

This disgraceful situation brings us to the third story. Because it has been impossible for the Obama administration either to prosecute or release the detainees, it appears to have little interest in capturing new prisoners and bringing

them to Guantánamo, where they would be subjected to indefinite detention. So instead, Obama apparently decided to assassinate suspected enemy combatants, virtually anywhere they are found. While it may be easier to kill them rather than hold them forever and be criticized for adding to the mess at Guantánamo, the ramifications of this new policy may be even more poisonous.

Drones, of course, play a central role in this assassination strategy. Obama has a



kill list known as the “disposition matrix,” and there is a meeting every Tuesday in the White House—it is called “Terror Tuesday”—where the next round of victims is selected. The extent to which the Obama administration has bought into this strategy is reflected in the increased frequency of drone strikes since November 2002, when they first began. Micah Zenko wrote in the *Financial Times* in May 2013 that

there have been “approximately 425 non-battlefield targeted killings (more than 95 per cent by drones). Roughly 50 took place during Mr. Bush’s tenure, and 375 (and counting) under Mr. Obama’s.”

This assassination strategy leaves hardly any room for due process. Indeed, the CIA is authorized to kill young males who are not known to be terrorists, but are merely exhibiting suspicious behavior, whatever that might be. It is also difficult to identify targets clearly from a platform thousands of feet above the ground. Not surprisingly, there are numerous cases where drones have hit innocent civilians. It is difficult to get firm numbers, but it seems clear that at least 10–15 percent of the victims have been civilians. Finally, Obama has used drones to purposely kill an American citizen in Yemen when there was no evidence he was an imminent threat to the United States. This unprecedented act raises fundamental questions about due process, and shows how dangerous an interventionist foreign policy is for core civil liberties.

A comment by former CIA director Michael Hayden in 2012 captures just how misguided Obama’s assassination strategy is: “Right now, there isn’t a government on the planet that agrees with our legal rationale for these operations, except for Afghanistan and maybe Israel.”

What makes these policies even more alarming is that the national-security elites who execute and support them fervently believe in “American exceptionalism.” They are convinced that the United States is morally superior to every other country on earth. It is, so the story goes, the “light of the world,” a shining city on a hill. Americans stand tall and see further than other peoples, as Madeleine Albright put it. These elites obviously do not look in the mirror. But, if they did, they would understand why people all around the

world think hypocrites of the first order run American foreign policy.

The U.S. commitment to global domination since the Cold War ended has had huge costs and brought few benefits. That is especially true in the years since September 11. Nevertheless, there has been remarkably little change in how the foreign-policy establishment thinks about America’s role in the world. From neoconservatives on the right to liberal imperialists on the left, there has been no meaningful diminishment in their commitment to intervening in countries all across the globe.

The American public, however, has become less enthusiastic about acting as the world’s policeman, especially when it means using military force and possibly getting involved in more wars. But this disconnect between the foreign-policy elites and the citizenry had not hindered the pursuit of global domination in any meaningful way until this past summer, when President Obama threatened to bomb Syria. It quickly became apparent that a large majority of Americans were strongly opposed to using military force there. Indeed, the opposition was so apparent that Obama seemed unlikely to get congressional backing for an attack, even though he promised it would be limited and the United States would not be drawn into another war. It was, as columnist Peggy Noonan put it, “a fight between the country and Washington, between the broad American public and Washington’s central governing assumptions.”

In effect, the public is saying it is fed up with America’s interventionist policies and it is time to focus greater attention on fixing problems at home. According to a poll done for the *Wall Street Journal* and NBC News in September 2013, 74 percent of Americans believe their country is “doing too much in other countries, and it is time

to do less around the world and focus more on problems here at home.” Hopefully, the backlash over Syria is a harbinger of things to come, and the public will increasingly put limits on the elites’ penchant for pursuing imperial missions.

Another encouraging sign is that there was hardly any enthusiasm in the U.S.

outspokenness to the limit.

None of this is to say the United States should become isolationist or ignore its position in the global balance of power. On the contrary, it should make sure it remains the most powerful country on the planet, which means making sure a rising China does not dominate Asia the way the United



military for attacking Syria. Hopefully, the senior leadership and the rank and file finally recognize they have been asked to fight losing wars that matter little for the security of the United States and that most of their fellow citizens consider not worth fighting. There are sound reasons to limit how much criticism military commanders can direct at civilian leaders and their policies. At the present moment, however, the generals should push their

States dominates the Western Hemisphere. It should also use force when core strategic interests are threatened. But Washington should stop intervening in the politics of countries like Egypt and Syria and more generally abandon its interventionist strategy of global domination, which has led to unending trouble. We might then begin to restore the tarnished liberal-democratic principles that once made America truly exceptional and widely admired. □