What Is America's Purpose?

Several decades after the end of the Cold War, the United States is confronting an increasingly unstable world in which its preeminence is facing new challenges. What, if anything, should be the purpose of American power?

In 1989, a recent college graduate interviewed for a job with *National Interest* editor Owen Harries. Harries, the former Australian ambassador to UNESCO, asked whether he sympathized more with the neoconservative or realist approach to foreign affairs. After a short pause, the candidate boldly split the difference, observing that it was wise to set limits on intervention abroad, but that it was also the case that, as Norman Podhoretz had recently observed in *Survey*, it was imperative to elicit a certain amount of nationalism among the American public to rouse it to action.

That candidate was, of course, me. *The National Interest* may have been founded in 1985 by Irving Kristol as a counterweight to *Commentary*, as Jonathan Bronitsky notes in this issue, but it proceeded, more or less, in an ecumenical spirit. One of my early assignments as an assistant editor was to work on an essay about the end of history by someone named Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama's article, which appeared in the Summer 1989 issue, established the basis for a crusading neoconservative doctrine that reached full flower in the George W. Bush administration, though Kristol, with his characteristic acerbity, commented, "I don't believe a word of it." (Fukuyama himself would go on to decry the intellectual votaries of the 2003 Iraq War.) A year later, on its fifth anniversary, *TNI* conducted a lengthy series in which the contributors sought to explain what purpose should inform America's foreign policy. Now, on the magazine's thirtieth anniversary, it seemed like a good idea to return to that question. The answers that follow suggest that it is as pertinent today as it was a quarter century ago.

—Jacob Heilbrunn
Editor, *The National Interest*

Graham Allison

The primary purpose of American power should be to "preserve the U.S. as a free nation with our fundamental institutions and values intact." This sturdy one-liner from the Cold War captures the big idea. It also reminds us of our too-often-forgotten yet most vital national interest. In the twenty-first century, such a bold assertion of "America First"—without apology—offends many postmodern sensibilities. For many U.S. citizens today, "American leadership" means serving as a global 911, defending those unable or unwilling to defend themselves, bearing any burden, paying any price. Abroad, any intimation that Americans at home should come first invites criticism for short-sighted selfishness unworthy of a great power.

But brute facts are hard to deny: the survival and success of the United States as a free nation is the *essential prerequisite* for America's power being applied to achieve any larger objectives in the world.

Having paid the price in blood and treasure of two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century, leaders we now revere as "wise men" knew that withdrawal to Fortress America could no longer assure Americans' survival and well-being. A new international environment required nothing less than a new world order. Their grand project combined enlightened self-interest with lofty ideals of a people whose Declaration of Independence claims for all human beings basic rights "endowed by their Creator." It also called for mobilization of all dimensions of American power. In a unique surge of imagination and initiative, these pragmatic visionaries created the Marshall Plan (to rebuild Europe); the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (to provide basic economic order); NATO and the U.S.-Japanese alliance (to ensure that what they saw as geostrategic centers of gravity became pillars of international security); and the United Nations—all building blocks of an emerging global order. This order aimed to advance the cause of peace, prosperity and freedom for all—Americans, their allies and other nations, in that order.

The past seven decades of great-power peace, unprecedented economic growth and unparalleled expansion of freedom bear testament to the foresight and courage of these statesmen. Since the end of the Cold War, American policy has too often lost its grounding in American national interests. As we address challenges posed by Russia, China, the Islamic State and others, Americans should study the strategy of the "wise men" and try to follow their lead.

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Ian Bremmer

Only the United States can combine military muscle, economic clout and cultural appeal to exert power in every region of

the world. It will remain the world's sole superpower for the foreseeable future. How should America use that power? To promote American values, advance U.S. interests, do both or do something else entirely? For Americans and the future of their country, what is the wisest path forward?

For decades, the Soviet threat persuaded Washington to use the nation's power in support of both American values and U.S. interests around the world. The Cold War sometimes blurred the line between the two as some U.S. policy makers argued that each bolstered the other. But when the Soviet Union imploded, so did the strategic coherence of U.S. foreign policy.

A quarter century later, important changes, in America and the world, demand that U.S. policy makers redefine the purpose of U.S. power. Following the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the American people will not support a U.S. military commitment that might require a costly, long-term commitment of U.S. troops and taxpayer dollars, limiting the range of options available to any president. There is now an entire generation of Americans not old enough to remember Cold War–era U.S. leadership.

Further, a lengthening list of emerging powers has begun to challenge the American-led order. China and others cannot undermine America's global preeminence anytime soon, but they have the political self-confidence and economic heft to resist U.S. plans and demands. As a result, even traditional U.S. allies have begun to hedge their bets on American staying power, further limiting Washington's foreign-policy options.

For Washington, choices loom. Perhaps the time has come for Americans to declare their independence from the need to intervene in other people's problems. Instead of spending trillions to occupy and rebuild troubled countries, invest the money at home. Rebuild American infrastructure, invest in education, care for America's veterans and leave more in the taxpayer's pocket to fuel an economic revival. This is not isolationism. America should trade with both friends and competitors, and welcome immigrants to build the world's strongest workforce.

Or maybe we should maintain an ambitious foreign policy, but one that focuses on America's value rather than its values. Focus mainly on managing relations with China. Avoid further entanglement in the Middle East, including by allowing others to take the lead in combating the Islamic State. Build an intelligent foreign policy designed to maximize return on the taxpayer's investment. Set aside support for democracy and human rights where it creates obstacles rather than opportunities.

Or maybe our globalized, interconnected world demands American leadership. Some will insist that America cannot remain secure and prosperous as long as both autocracy and anarchy generate turmoil. Maybe democracy and human rights are the only answer to these forces, and America is the only nation strong enough to ensure

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that governments around the world answer to their citizens.

There is no clearly correct answer to this question, but we can't do all these things, and none of these options is viable without durable public support. The men and women running for president in 2016 will have to make a compelling case for a single, coherent foreign-policy strategy if Washington is to move beyond the costly improvisation of the past twenty-five years and employ American power in an intelligent and useful way.

David Bromwich

No nation has a purpose engraved on its character as the natural law was said to be engraved on the heart of a person. A nation, even more than a person, is a complex entity: you cannot touch, taste, hear, smell or see it as a whole. America's purpose, if we have one, must be inferred from our actions, as measured by the judgment of sane and reasonably well-informed persons.

The elites that governed the United States between 1990 and the present were broadly agreed on our national purpose. We existed in order to dominate the world for the world's own good. After all, most people everywhere wanted to be like us. On the other hand, a Gallup poll released at the end of 2013 showed that the United States is perceived worldwide as the greatest threat to world peace. American elites and international opinion have come to different conclusions.

Edmund Burke instructed the British Parliament concerning the American colonists in 1775: "Slavery they can have any where. It is a weed that grows in every soil. They may have it from Spain, they may have it from Prussia. But until you become lost to all feeling of your true interest and your natural dignity, freedom they can have from none but you." Americans, Burke thought, cared for liberty exorbitantly—in this they resembled the British—and Britain deserved to hold on to the colonists only if it respected their love of freedom without any coercive imposition.

Abraham Lincoln spoke in a similar vein regarding another American ideal, our faith in equality. The signers of the Declaration of Independence, said Lincoln, when they pledged their belief in the words "all men are created equal," intended

> to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.

What Lincoln did not mean by "spreading and deepening its influence" may be deduced from his opposition to the Mexican-

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American War. Like Burke, he thought that freedom ought to be exemplary, not evangelical. You prove the good of a way of life by setting an example.

As the Gallup poll suggests, the world now looks on the United States as a belligerent empire. We have become an object of fear more than admiration because we teach our way of life by force of arms. A restless hunger for dominion, once merely episodic in our history, turned into the pattern of policy after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. To act in keeping with a purpose in which we can feel a justified pride, we would have to become exemplary rather than evangelical in our practice of freedom.

William J. Burns

The international landscape facing the United States is as crowded, chaotic and competitive as it has been in any of our lifetimes. American global preeminence may not last forever. Betting on its imminent demise, however, would be deeply unwise.

All the standard indicators of national power project that the United States will remain the most significant global player for at least several decades. During this window, the United States has a genuine strategic opportunity to shape a twenty-first-century international order that reflects new realities and dynamics; guards against regional hegemons and nonstate security threats; and updates the rules of the road and institutions essential to safeguarding the global commons and sustaining American interests and values.

Three organizing principles should guide the use of American power in a fragmented world.

First, effective projection of American power requires reinforcing America's economic, political and moral foundations. America today is in continuing need of renewal. Even in the midst of a robust recovery, we face no shortage of pressing economic challenges. At a time in which we are working hard to mobilize coalitions abroad, we cannot seem to mobilize them at home. And as long as we fail to protect the civil rights of all our citizens, the resonance of our example will continue to suffer.

Second, we need to continue to rebalance our priorities and strategic investments across regions of the world. We also need to rebalance our power portfolio—prioritizing diplomacy backed by force, as opposed to force backed by diplomacy, and long-term affirmative investments in development aid and liberal trade along with near-term punitive actions like sanctions.

That is why completing the Trans-Pacific Partnership is so critical for our staying power in the Asia-Pacific. It is why finding a stable mix of competition and cooperation in relations with a rising China is so central to regional and international order. It is why investing in strategic partnership with India remains essential, and why reinvigorating transatlantic ties

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through a new trade agreement and a common approach to revived challenges from Russia will be crucial. It is why a strong, verifiable agreement with Iran is the best of the available alternatives to prevent and deter Iran from developing a nuclear weapon—even as we must ensure its rigorous execution and embed it in a wider strategy for reassuring our friends and pushing back against threatening Iranian behavior across the Middle East. And it is why active focus on the Western Hemisphere, and the opportunities it offers as an emerging center of gravity in the global energy market, is so necessary.

Finally, American power should seek to reshape global rules of the road and institutions to fit new realities. We cannot afford to wait for other forces and other events to reshape the international system for us. The failure thus far to adapt the International Monetary Fund or to engage constructively on the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank offers a striking recent example of the risks of ceding the initiative. There is simply too much at stake over the next few years in the realms of commerce, climate and cyberspace, among many other overarching issues, to react rather than act.

Tom Cotton

In no region of the world is U.S. influence greater than it was six years ago. In fact, in many regions, it's greatly diminished. The post–Cold War consensus is under threat in Europe. The balance of power in the Asia-Pacific is tipping toward China. And the Middle East has entered a period of upheaval and possible realignment that threatens the United States and our allies. On the strategic challenges of our time, we're hard-pressed to identify any major achievements under our current commander in chief that are not eclipsed by broader failures.

These are the bitter fruits of a foreign policy premised on strategic retreat. President Obama has ceded levels of regional influence to competing powers despite the immediate consequences for the interests of the United States and our partners.

The motivation for this was in part practical, driven by a belief that America cannot—as a structural or historic matter—maintain its lone superpower status and must instead accommodate a "rise of the rest." But the motivation is also ideological. Our president exhibits a certain reticence when it comes to America's moral authority. He seems preoccupied with America's perceived historical failings, invoking sins from America's past to assuage the feelings of tyrants in the present.

This lack of confidence in the long-run potential of our military and economic power and diffidence about our moral standing manifest themselves in policy decisions both big and small, but at all times detrimental to U.S. interests.

But just as misguided policy decisions have led us into this situation, certain policy reversals would expand our options over the long term, and foster an environment where

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the United States can increasingly shape challenges rather than being forced to react to them.

First, we must reinvigorate our military. Frederick the Great said, "Diplomacy without arms is like music without instruments." In other words, it's inert, inaudible and ineffective. Rebuilding our influence means we must rebuild a military that has faced devastating budget cuts and fifteen years of war. This will require dramatically greater levels of defense spending than Congress and our president have managed to agree upon. Make no mistake: our current defense budget is a mere political compromise. It's not linked to any strategy that confronts the threats we face today or the threats we'll encounter tomorrow.

But just as diplomacy is sterile without military might, the force of arms is useless without a coherent foreign policy and a clear sense of our objectives. To maintain our centuries-old position in Asia and continue to foster the region's peaceful movement toward greater liberty and freer trade, we must make clear to China that any attempt to exclude the United States from Asia—whether militarily, economically or politically—will be futile.

In Europe, we should draw a firm line with Russia, one that must feature more U.S. military assistance to partners that require it. And we must work more assertively and creatively with our European allies to put their union on firmer political and economic footing so that the vision of "a Europe whole and free" will be an enduring one.

And in the Middle East, we must recognize that the objective of destroying the Islamic State is not helped by empowering Iran—the Shia face of the same radical jihadist coin. Stability in the region will not be achieved by enhancing the influence of an actor that has worked for over thirty years to undermine global security.

The challenges we face abroad are deeply complicated and contingent on a number of military, economic, political and cultural factors. Determining how we respond to them will require much wisdom and decisiveness. But as we continue these debates, we must keep in mind the clear lesson of the past six years. Retreat—on both the military and moral planes—only invites aggression, chaos and disorder. The policies we pursue should exhibit confidence in American power and in America's mission.

Paula J. Dobriansky

The purpose of American power, which includes military, economic, diplomatic, ideological, legal and cultural components, is to protect the entire range of our national-security interests. While we face many pressing domestic challenges, America cannot

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afford to focus on them alone. Americans cannot be secure and prosperous without a stable, rule-driven international order. Terrorism, refugee flows, pandemic diseases, pollution, cyberattacks, economic decay, nuclear proliferation and military aggression can directly threaten our security and prosperity even when they arise overseas.

We cannot handle these threats successfully in an ad hoc fashion. American power must be continuously applied to maintain political, military and economic international institutions and alliances that, with effective U.S. leadership, can safeguard global stability, economic growth and the rule of law. This does not mean that every foreign dispute or fight concerns us. But we must counter fundamental assaults on the existing global liberal order.

This task is particularly crucial today, since the post–Cold War international framework is under attack by numerous challenges, including Islamic fundamentalism, growing Sunni-Shia strife, Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons and become the preeminent power in the Middle East, Russian revanchism, and China's efforts to exercise dominion over Asia and strong-arm its neighbors.

In addition to these hard-power threats, the world faces numerous humanitarian crises, ranging from famines, environmental devastation and extreme weather events to flows of refugees and displaced persons. While the United States cannot solve all of these problems, consistent with our moral values, it has been a world leader in rendering humanitarian assistance and helping to alleviate poverty worldwide.

America must always retain the ability, when necessary, to use its power unilaterally. However, the United States has been most successful when it has worked with international institutions and alliances, partnering with like-minded countries and combining their resources and capabilities with our own. Furthermore, the best way to deal with potential international threats is to deter them from arising or at least defeat them before they become acute. This requires continuous American leadership and credibility, especially in upholding our international commitments, to reassure our allies and deter our enemies.

Crucially, America must wield its power in ways that maximize the synergy among its components. Our "soft power," which is rooted in our values and culture, is very important, since it enables us to foster the legitimacy of a rule-driven international order that features democratic governance at home and peaceful resolution of disputes abroad. Our economic power builds upon our soft power and contributes to global economic prosperity, undergirded by shared commitments to market economies and free trade. When necessary, America must employ military power, ranging from providing training and military aid, to using American special-operations forces and air power, to deploying ground forces.

The robust use of American power and leadership to shape developments overseas has always been an essential prerequisite of sound statecraft capable of safeguarding our interests and values. This is even more imperative in today's turbulent and dangerous international environment.

Yoichi Funabashi

The future of American power must be a long-term game of strategic rebalancing—both in the Asia-Pacific region and at home. A momentous shift in economic, military and political power is rapidly taking place in Asia, with global repercussions. The great drama of the twenty-first century will be the trajectory of China's rise. The challenge posed by China is twofold. An ascendant China is a rival to U.S. power and a potential threat to the post–World War II liberal international order, of which China has been a beneficiary. If Beijing seeks to undermine the existing order and establish an alternative system based on its own Sinocentric strategic vision, then the organizing principles that have laid the foundation for unprecedented peace, stability and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific are at risk of being overturned.

Despite China's newly realized status as the greatest potential contender to American power, a Cold War policy of containment is no longer viable. The United States must act as the primary and ever-present balancer within the region. Withdrawal is not an option. America's main challenge is to effectively reaffirm the principles of the liberal international order, maintain the initiative in shaping the strategic environment alongside like-minded partners, and facilitate China's ascent and willing integration into the rules-based order. This should be the purpose of American power.

Undeniably, in recent years the United States has identified the Asia-Pacific as the "defining region" for the future and responded by outlining a "pivot" or "rebalancing" strategy for the region. Yet, despite reassurances that the rebalance is moving into its "next phase," there remain serious doubts as to the vitality of the strategy and the very viability of Washington's lasting commitment to the region. America's role as a rebalancing power must go beyond the Obama administration and evolve into a sustainable and bipartisan doctrine—only in this sense should it resemble the fabled containment policy. What the United States lacks but most urgently needs is a new Asia-Pacific dream to counter Beijing's "China dream." Building this long-term vision cannot be the responsibility of the United States alone. Regional players should be involved in creating and narrating this story.

Specifically, this grand strategy should have the following features. First, we must learn from the success of postwar Germany's and Japan's reintroductions into the liberal international order, and in a similar manner, encourage the integration of emerging powers such as India, Vietnam, Indonesia and Myanmar as stakeholder states. Second, the United States should leverage its Cold War regional alliances (Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines) as key coalition partners in shaping the regional architecture—going beyond the logic of the hub-and-spoke system. Washington

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should act as an enabler that encourages its like-minded partners to take on greater leadership responsibilities, particularly in maritime security. Third, while constructive engagement with China and avoiding suppression should be the primary objective, the concept of the Indo-Pacific is a crucial counterweight against potential Chinese adventurism.

To be sure, the recommendations so far have been limited to external rebalancing. Of equal importance is America's need of an internal rebalance. America must rediscover its status as the "city upon a hill." There are three key issues to address. First, the United States should reduce its dependence on China, which has large holdings of U.S. public debt. Next, the rapidly widening wealth gap must be checked, and the middle class should be reestablished as the foundation of society. Finally, the United States must overcome the partisanship and gridlock in Congress. Victory for the rules-based international order in the Asia-Pacific hinges on this two-pronged rebalancing process. America must pursue "quiet deterrence" to ensure the future stability of the international system.

Leslie H. Gelb

There will be no consensus on the purposes of U.S. foreign policy for a long time. Half of the explanation is that while international problems were always very difficult, now they are eye-crossingly so. Key issues today—like combating terrorism, China, Russia and global warming—defy traditional calculations of what American power can accomplish and how. The other half of the explanation is the diminished clout of realists in U.S. national-security debates. For sure, extremists on the left and right always have had their say, but there was usually enough strength in the pragmatic center to put together viable policies at critical junctures. Today's "debates" flow almost exclusively from extremist ideology, uncompromising politics and faint comprehension of the meaning of strategy.

For starters, the global terrain differs profoundly from the last half of the twentieth century, the landmark for the foreign-policy experts and commentators. Europe was the center of the universe for centuries; now, it's generally Asia. Military punch between states was the final arbiter of conflicts; now, it's mostly economic power, and most uses of force are not between nations but within them. There are profoundly cross-cutting pressures such as Asian nations that want protection from China, yet cringe at the thought of losing Beijing's trade and investments. There still are major powers—the United States above all, as well as Russia and China—but none is as super as it used to be. It was clear how to deter a major attack in the past, but terrorist threats today are much less solvable in the short and medium term. And global warming is no joke. Very few

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foreign-policy mavens are intellectually equipped to manage these new features and factors.

Alas, my advice is merely modesty and common sense. First, the United States is the only nation capable of world leadership, and most others actually want Washington to lead. Second, to lead, our presidents must have real strategies that make sense and take the interests of others into account. Third, goals have to be limited to accord with reduced power and international complexities. For example, containment of China and Russia today can't work without being fully tied to cooperative diplomacy. Likewise, today's terrorists can't simply be defeated on the battlefield in three or five years. But Washington can put together working partnerships to strangle the monsters gradually and steadily without plunging into open-ended and losing ground wars.

Our presidents have to take pains in public and private to very carefully and vividly explain their strategies, to show what can and can't be accomplished at reasonable cost and how. And then explain some more. As for foreign-policy experts, they might consider holding themselves to higher account than simply to argue "do more" or "do nothing."

Gary Hart

This is a call for making principles the centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy. That is both less and more radical than it sounds. Less, because most policy makers believe themselves naturally to be men and women of principle. More, because the assumption that we are a principled nation simply because we are American is not always true.

One does not have to be a veteran of the Church Committee to recall the overthrow of governments, assassination attempts against foreign leaders, support for repressive dictators, misbegotten wars, dubious alliances and so on.

In the realm of principled behavior, there is a gap between our proclaimed convictions and the performance of our relations in the world. Chalk most of this questionable conduct up to expediency, haste, perceived necessity, ideological motivation, mistaken intelligence or simple ignorance of history.

Both foreign-policy gurus and casual students are familiar with recent divisions between idealists and realists. Idealists are themselves divided between liberals willing to use diplomatic pressure and military force to protect human rights, and neoconservatives willing to use military force to achieve regime change and, ideally, the installation of democracy.

Realists, in contrast, take the world as it is and advocate that the United States operate within that world to protect its own national interests.

Most foreign-policy analysis is premised on nations possessing, in varying degrees, three powers: economic, political and military. For this discussion, let's assume

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there is a fourth power possessed uniquely, though not uniformly demonstrated, by the United States. That fourth power is the power of principle.

We are envied in the world for our standard of living. We are respected and admired for the principles upon which our nation was founded. These include not only our constitutional rights and liberties, but also the civic virtue of citizen participation in the process of government required in a republic for the protection of those rights.

The path of expediency followed by both idealists and realists since the rise of the national-security state in 1947 has eroded both the respect contained in the opinions of mankind throughout the world and the principles upon which our nation was founded. The trickery we employed in the dark alleys of the world during the Cold War is no longer available to us in an age of instant communications, transparency and Edward Snowden.

We sacrifice our fourth power of principle, and the moral authority it provides, when we pursue policies of power imposition, self-interest, superiority and expediency. That is a high price to pay, especially for a nation that claims to hold itself to a higher standard.

Our purpose should be to apply those principles to governance in the age of globalization. We must work to expand our information-technology leadership, reduce poverty and form new alliances to combat irregular, unconventional warfare.

Against the tapestry of history, the power of principle is mightier than the sword, the dollar and the megaphone.

Paul Kennedy

The American nation-state, as Bismarck once observed, is quite lucky. It is blessed with abundant woods, grass and water. It possesses vast amounts of raw materials. It has a benign, prosperous, unthreatening neighbor to the north and a messy, unthreatening neighbor to the south; by contrast, Russia and China each have fourteen troublesome ones. The nearest large military powers to the United States lie three thousand miles across the Atlantic, and, ignoring Alaska, six thousand miles across the Pacific.

History also appears to be on America's side. When the English and others poured into the country after 1600, they brought with them advanced toolware, organized husbandry, civic architecture, water power and gunpowder weaponry, followed later by the Scientific Revolution, the spinning jenny, notes of credit and country banks, representative government, factory manufacture and the reciprocating steam engine. France distracted British power and prevented the American Revolution from being crushed, and then the Royal Navy protected the Western Hemisphere until 1905, when the U.S. Navy took over. America came late into the two world wars, and emerged as Mr. Big in 1945. Everyone else was devastated and exhausted. Washington then had half of the world's GDP. Its technology was unequaled. Its

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demographics were running nicely (they still are).

Maybe the best thing for America at that point would have been to stop there—didn't George F. Kennan suggest just that?

But by this stage America's "power" had acquired a "purpose." Or purposes. One was to advance American capitalism and democracy, the two often complacently conflated with each other. Another was to defeat Communism. Then there was the task of promoting reform in Africa and Asia by easing out the derelict colonialism that Whitehall epitomized. To these ends, a variety of methods might be deployed—the U.S. Air Force, the United Nations, NATO, the Peace Corps and so on. The White House, Congress and the American people would sort out the wheres and the whens and the how muches, but all seemed to agree with Henry Stimson that there was nowhere in the world that would not be of interest to America.

But while the American presence surged outward after 1945, its share of world GDP was steadily diminishing. Other big powers emerged. Much of the world has proved intractable to American purposes. It has lost Asian wars, it runs large deficits, it . . . well. Many, perhaps most, Americans sense this, but Washington doesn't seem to know how to stop.

So here it is now, in 2015, like a large man straddling stools. Its purpose should be to sort out its international purpose. Right now, though, it shows no chance of doing that. Instead, it remains entranced by what an outside observer of the budding American imperium once shrewdly diagnosed as the illusion of omnipotence.

Zalmay Khalilzad

At the end of the Cold War, the United States was in a favorable position, without a global rival and with little risk of war among the major powers. At the time, one of the main purposes of U.S. power was to consolidate that order. Today, that order has not been consolidated. The world is far more chaotic and dangerous, and threatens to become even worse.

The objective of the United States should be to catalyze agreements on political order at the regional level by creating and sustaining balances of power that preclude regional hegemony. The focus of these efforts should be Europe, the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East.

The paradox of a declining but belligerent Russia requires that the United States help Ukraine thwart Vladimir Putin's aggression by arming and training its forces to bog down his hybrid offensive. If we increase the costs to Moscow, we will improve the chances of a deal that respects Ukraine's sovereignty, meets legitimate Russian concerns, and alters Putin's risk calculus about taking similar actions in the Baltic states or Georgia. We should

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strengthen support to those who feel threatened by Russia, but simultaneously remain open to dialogue and cooperate with Russia on issues of mutual concern such as Islamic extremism and terrorism.

The rise of an increasingly wealthy and aggressive China should be countered by bolstering the military capabilities of regional powers that share the concern about Chinese hegemony, including Japan, India, the Philippines, Vietnam and others. The United States should work to network and build habits of cooperation among these countries.

The seemingly interminable regional rivalries and Sunni-Shia conflict that sustain violent extremist groups represent a more complex challenge. We must not side with the Shia against the Sunnis or vice versa, but instead promote a regional balance of power, particularly in the Gulf. Also, stability will require us to lead an effort to commit ourselves to the hard work of ending the civil war in Syria and inducing Iraqis to adopt political arrangements not dominated by sectarian Shia Arab parties at the expense of other communities and political groups. In doing so, we will also set the needed condition to mobilize local forces against the Islamic State.

In each of these regions, steps to create a balance of power must be complemented by efforts to build regional institutions to encourage dialogue, confidence building and reconciliation among major powers. In Europe, a more robust Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) could draw Russia back into the European order. In the Asia-Pacific, the United States should seek to catalyze the creation of an analogue to the OSCE that would eventually develop a forum to resolve maritime territorial disputes. In the Middle East, we could encourage the formation of a body comparable to ASEAN, which at first would simply enable dialogue but which could work to create rules of the road down the line.

While a strategy of "balance and reconcile" should be the template for building durable order in critical regions, Americans should seek to shape the political evolution of the world by advocating liberal democracy and working with patriotic and visionary leaders who seek to enable their peoples to live under governments that respect human rights and dignity. America's formula for success in the twentieth century had both geopolitical and ideological dimensions. And if more societies are able to adopt democratic forms of government and come to uphold universal values, the United States will find more partners and allies in efforts to rebuild order.

Michael Lind

NSC-68, the 1950 Truman administration document that shaped America's successful Cold War strategy of containment, began with a section entitled "The Fundamental Purpose of the United States." It stated: "In essence, the fundamental purpose is to assure the integrity and vitality of our free society, which is founded upon the dignity and worth of the individual." The purpose

not only of U.S. foreign policy but also of the American republic itself is the preservation, in America, of what the Founders called "republican liberty."

Republican liberty in America can be threatened from within by tyranny, oligarchy or anarchy. External threats can also undermine the American way of life. If world conditions become so dangerous that the United States can maintain its national independence only by militarizing society and conscripting the economy, then the American people—reluctantly, perhaps—will have purchased national security at the expense of individual liberty.

As President Woodrow Wilson observed, "You know how impossible it is, in short, to have a free nation if it is a military nation and under military orders." In order to avert this outcome, American statesmen in the twentieth century sought to replace endless cycles of major-power wars, hot and cold, with what Wilson called "some definite concert of power."

The first attempt at a great-power concert collapsed when the United States withdrew into isolation after World War I. Following World War II, the bankruptcy of Britain, the Communist takeover of China and the aggression of the Soviet Union doomed FDR's vision of a postwar concert of "the Four Policemen." During the Cold War, America improvised a policy of "quadruple containment"—encircling the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, while converting West Germany and Japan into U.S. protectorates.

When the Cold War ended, America's leaders refused even to consider replacing adversarial alliances and outmoded international institutions with a new global great-power concert that would include post-Soviet Russia and post-Maoist China as well as rising powers like India and Brazil. Instead, neoconservatives and neoliberal hawks as arrogant as they were optimistic sought to establish U.S. global hegemony. Washington extended NATO into former Soviet territory, defined permanent U.S. military domination of China's neighborhood as a vital interest, and tried to turn Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria into American client states.

Excluded and encircled by the United States, China and Russia have aggressively sought to create their own spheres of influence, along with parallel international institutions that America and its allies cannot control. The result is a cold peace that may become another cold war.

Even if the United States had the wealth and power to achieve lasting global military hegemony, it lacks the will. The American people are unwilling to pay the price, as the political backlash against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and public opposition to higher taxes have proven.

It is time for Washington to abandon its misguided post–Cold War hegemony strategy in favor of what I have described as a "concert-balance" strategy. The best way to protect the American way of life from being sacrificed to defensive

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militarism is neither isolationism nor global domination. It is participation in a great-power concert that results in a less dangerous world.

Kishore Mahbubani

World history has gone through three phases since World War II: the bipolar era in the Cold War period; the unipolar era in the post–Cold War period; and, with the natural return of China and India as great powers, we are on the verge of entering a truly multipolar era. American power was used wisely, and with great restraint, in the Cold War, but unwisely, and with great abandon, in the post–Cold War era. America now has the opportunity to use its power wisely again in the multipolar era.

During the Cold War, America accumulated genuine allies. The Marshall Plan and American generosity connected American and European hearts. On many challenges, America allowed others to take the lead. As Singapore's ambassador to the United Nations in the 1980s, I saw American wisdom in allowing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to take the lead in reversing the Soviet-supported Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. Multilateralism was supported. American diplomats were charming and persuasive. My American colleague at the UN, the legendary Vernon Walters, was remarkably humble.

Humility was replaced with hubris in the post–Cold War era. America believed it could act alone. It abandoned erstwhile allies with glee, including the once-revered mujahideen in Afghanistan. This thoughtless disengagement led to tragic results. The tragedy of 9/11 was borne out of this. The American reaction to 9/11 made things worse. Instead of acting multilaterally, America, with great arrogance, acted unilaterally. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 represented the peak of American folly. The decision to destroy the Baath Party and dismantle the Iraqi army reflected great stupidity in the use of U.S. power. Why did these mistakes happen? America believed that the sole superpower was a "superman."

With the reemergence of a multipolar world, America now has a precious opportunity to return once again to wise use of American power. All is not lost. Three simple changes could make American power effective again. First, humility should replace arrogance. American leaders in the government and the media should listen, not preach, to the rest of the world. Genuine alliances and partnerships can only be forged through a deep understanding of each other's interests. A strong partnership between India and Iran, for example, is not detrimental to American interests. Second, education should replace ignorance. With the end of Western domination of world history, the twenty-

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first century will be both multipolar and multicivilizational. Monolingual American policy makers should become bilingual. A deep understanding of the rich histories of other civilizations, including the Chinese, Indian, Iranian and Russian civilizations, is a necessity, not a luxury. Third, America employed multilateralism at the end of World War II and abandoned it at the end of the Cold War. As I document in my book *The Great Convergence*, strong multilateral institutions and processes will enhance U.S. power and restrain emerging powers. A simple return to multilateralism would demonstrate that America has once again learned how to use its power wisely. It is simple. It can be done.

John J. Mearsheimer

The purpose of American power is to keep the United States safe so its people can prosper economically and live in relative freedom. There is little agreement, however, on how to achieve that goal.

Since the Cold War ended, and especially since 9/11, the ruling elites in Washington have believed that the best way to protect the United States is to dominate the world and remake it in America's image. They have relied upon military power and other forms of big-stick diplomacy to topple unfriendly governments and promote democracy. Thus, it is unsurprising that the United States has fought seven wars since 1989.

Unfortunately, this strategy has led to a string of disasters and is the main cause of the growing instability around the globe.

Take the greater Middle East. The George W. Bush administration initiated unsuccessful wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that cost many thousands of lives, destroyed the regional balance of power and helped create the Islamic State. The Obama administration has foolishly prolonged the war in Afghanistan and launched a war against the Islamic State that it cannot win. It also helped topple Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya, which produced a failed state, and its policies have helped prolong Syria's devastating civil war.

In Europe, Washington and its European allies precipitated a major crisis with Russia by trying to peel Ukraine away from Moscow's orbit and make it a Western bulwark on Russia's doorstep. The key ingredients of this boneheaded policy were NATO and EU expansion, coupled with democracy promotion, which effectively means installing pro-Western leaders in countries like Ukraine—and maybe even Russia itself. Not surprisingly, Russia has fiercely resisted the West's efforts to win over Ukraine, which is now engulfed in a civil war.

Trying to dominate the globe and push democracy on other countries does not work, as the United States has proved over the past twenty-five years. It is also unnecessary. The United States—because of geography, its sheer power and its nuclear arsenal—is remarkably secure. There is no

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need to pursue global domination, much less try to manage the domestic politics of other countries.

There is one meaningful threat to the United States: the appearance of a potential hegemon in Asia or Europe. The purpose of American power should be to ensure that the United States remains a hegemon in the Western Hemisphere, and that there is no regional hegemon in Eurasia. This rationale led the United States to help prevent Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union from becoming regional hegemons in the twentieth century, and it remains relevant today.

Regional hegemons are dangerous to the United States, because dominating their own neighborhood would give them freedom to intervene elsewhere, just as the American military is free to roam the planet today. The great danger is that a distant hegemon would eventually start to meddle in the Western Hemisphere, which could present a serious threat to the United States.

Fortunately, there is no potential hegemon in Europe, but there is one in Asia: China. Accordingly, the principal purpose of American power should be to maintain U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere and prevent China from achieving regional hegemony in Asia.

Robert W. Merry

America is the most powerful nation in the world, perhaps the most powerful nation in world history. Thus, it has a major global role to play. But foreign policy must focus above all on the interests of the nation itself, and its people. That means, first, protecting vital American interests at home and in our region. It means, second, maintaining the country's position in the world so that it can successfully execute the first requirement. It means, third, avoiding messy military involvements that undermine America's global position and sap its resources. If the first job of U.S. foreign policy is to ensure the well-being of the American people, then any action that undermines that well-being, without justifiable longer-term returns, is foolhardy. The hurts and wants of unfortunate peoples caught in the vortex of history don't come into this equation, as sad as that is.

But America's standing in the world confers upon it two other fundamental requirements. First, as the core state of Western civilization, America bears a burden to protect the West from any fundamental threats. This was the U.S. role throughout the Cold War, beginning when Europe was on its back but continuing throughout the Continent's steady rise from its immediate postwar enervation. Second, America has a responsibility to maintain stability, to the degree that it can, in major strategic locations in the world. That burden comes with unequaled power.

But the purposes of U.S. power are one thing. How they should be pursued

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is quite another. It's a fool's mission to project military power to maintain a global hegemonic status that ignores powerful interests and imperatives of other major nations. Hence, American power should be used to back up diplomacy aimed at maintaining a stable balance of power in the world insofar as possible. This means correctly identifying those nations and forces that threaten the three great American interests—security of the homeland; security for Europe; and stability at key global strategic locations. We can't do it alone. We need friends and allies. And we won't have friends and allies if we operate without regard to their vital interests.

It boils down to this: Who are our friends, and who are our enemies? Our enemies are those nations and forces positioned, and with intent, to threaten America's pursuit of its three central foreign-policy imperatives. Our friends are those positioned to help us in dealing with those enemies. Hence, if the Islamic State is our enemy, then Syria's Bashar al-Assad is not. If Islamist fundamentalism, unleashed on 9/11, was our enemy, then Saddam Hussein was not. If China is emerging as a threat to our ability to maintain stability in Asia, then perhaps we should consider seriously the consequences of maintaining hostile relations with Russia, a traditional Chinese adversary.

American power is double-edged. It can be used to protect us and the world. It also can quickly destabilize the world, at which point its ability to protect us declines precipitously.

Ferdinand Mount

Almost every word of *The National Interest*'s question could itself be questioned:

Has the Cold War ever definitively ended? Vladimir Putin doesn't seem to think so.

Is the world increasingly unstable? Large parts of it are enjoying a peace, a prosperity and even a democracy that they have never known (e.g., South America and large parts of Africa and South Asia, not to mention Western Europe and North America).

Is America's preeminence really being challenged? Certainly not militarily, and declinist economic predictions are a recurring fashion, no sooner embraced than rebutted by the continuing vigor shown by the U.S. economy.

The purposes of American power are what they have always been. President Obama has been frugal with his interventions, though his passivity can be overestimated. Obama's Drones Club is a long way from P. G. Wodehouse's. But his quiet presidency does create a space for his successor to readjust American priorities and preferences. Some of the new directions already visible may well be continued, whoever wins the election: the tilt toward Iran, for example, and the opening to Cuba. But in dealing with Russia and the Islamic State, the world will expect a flintier America—and will probably get it. The flexible but sustained realpolitik

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that Henry Kissinger so much admired in the European statesmen in the years after Waterloo remains the best model. The separation of power into soft and hard and the deployment of both, side by side, were not invented by the present age.

Grover Norquist

The purpose of American power is to protect the independence of the government and the liberty of the American people from threats from hostile states or political movements.

And what is the United States? Germany is a place and a people. France is a place, a language and a culture. America is a people of the book: the Constitution. We are not united by race or religion. We come from everywhere in the world. Even our language is fluid: an English base with new words and phrases flowing in from around the world. We are united by a commitment to individual liberty and the structures created by the Constitution that have ensured that liberty through our history.

Our armed forces are to protect our liberty. Not to expand our borders, convert or kill the heathen, settle ancient grievances against others or loot our neighbors' lands. We are not the Roman, Spanish, British or Soviet Empire.

As individuals we may wish everyone recognized our personal religious commitment as the one true faith. As individuals we may evangelize within our borders or even overseas. But our government does not employ an army in the name of any religion. We are not Spain circa 1500.

We may wish others saw the virtue of choosing their leaders through democratic elections. But American power should not be at the disposal of those who would—with whatever good intentions—impose their theories, however virtuous, on other peoples.

We can change the world to make it less threatening to us in two ways. First, by remaining militarily and economically strong enough to deter would-be threats, and by swiftly and surely punishing those who attack us. Second, through the "soft power" of being a good example. When we are seen as successful, rich, free and untroubled, others are most likely to admire and emulate us. Failed states attack nations they fear, not those they envy.

We should remember what made us free and great. Property rights. The economic liberty of contract and association. Low taxes and limited government. Our occupation of Japan was a success because Douglas MacArthur installed property rights. In Iraq and Afghanistan, we thought the secret sauce was periodic elections for control of the state.

Many nations have elections. Fewer have free societies. Those most anxious to misuse our military power to remake other nations are the most likely to miss what makes America exceptional. Elections are a good way to transfer power in a society already

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dedicated to liberty. But one can make a long list of nations with regular elections that are far from free.

We contained the Soviet Union. Our freer economy left it in the dust. When struck we can and usually should strike back, hard. But not to become entangled with a tar baby. Rather, we should move forward economically, leaving behind in the distance those who hate us—as we did with Cuba—to rant pathetically.

Joseph S. Nye Jr.

Since World War II, the United States has led, albeit imperfectly, in the production of global public goods such as a balance of military power, international monetary stability, an open trading system and freedom of navigation. That leadership should continue to be a central purpose of our foreign policy, because if the strongest country does not produce public goods, we and others will suffer from their absence.

Americans go through cycles of belief that we are in decline. While the United States has many problems (nothing new there), it is not in absolute decline like ancient Rome, which had no productivity growth. Because of immigration, we are the only major developed country that will not suffer a demographic decline by midcentury; our dependence on energy imports is diminishing rather than increasing; we are at the forefront of the major technologies that will shape this century; and our universities dominate the world rankings. We have more allies and connections than any other country.

The real challenge we face could be called "the rise of the rest." Even though the growth in emerging markets is unlikely to produce a single challenger that will overtake the United States, the "rise of the rest" creates a more complex world. The problem of leadership in such a world is how to get everyone into the act and still get action.

Military force will remain a crucial component of American power, but it is not sufficient. An American strategy that holds the military balance in Europe or East Asia while maintaining alliances is a crucial source of influence, but trying to occupy and control the internal politics of nationalistic populations in the Middle East revolutions is futile. We cannot turn our back on the region because of our interests in Israel, nonproliferation and human rights, among others. But our policy should be one of containing, balancing, nudging and influencing from the sidelines rather than an occupation that would be counterproductive. In contrast, the internal balance of power makes us welcome in Europe and Asia. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has revived NATO, and the rise of China creates concern in India, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines and other countries. We do not need a policy of containment of China. "Integrate but hedge" remains valid. The only country

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that can contain China is China, and as it presses its territorial conflicts with neighbors, China contains itself.

Under the influence of the information revolution and globalization, world politics are changing in a way that means the United States cannot achieve many of its international goals by going it alone. For example, maintaining international financial stability and countering global climate change depend on cooperation with Europe, Japan, China and others. In a world where borders are porous for everything from drugs to infectious diseases to cybercrime to terrorism, networks and institutions become an important source of relevant power. The American Century will continue in the sense of the centrality of the United States to the balance of power and the production of global public goods, but a successful foreign policy will look different from what it was in the latter half of the last century.

Paul R. Pillar

The application of American power should take its cue from the preamble to the U.S. Constitution: ultimately, the use of this power is about the common defense and general welfare of U.S. citizens. Any power applied abroad is necessarily based on strength at home, and that strength is a depletable resource that deserves our primary attention. The health of the American polity and economy also affects events overseas as a model and exemplar—a concept going back to John Winthrop's idea of a "city upon a hill." A large proportion of U.S. power is soft power based on the appeal of the American model, and that too is a resource that can easily be lost without assiduous nurturing.

Ample experience in recent U.S. history has shown how charging down the hill in efforts to apply power more directly and swiftly can easily lead to trouble. The United States never, even at the apex of its global influence, had the ability to remake the world in its own image. Instead, it should use the considerable instruments of influence it does have to encourage a global environment—political, economic and physical—that is more stable and habitable than the alternatives and in which the players compete for influence through legitimate and peaceful methods.

This means, first of all, that the United States itself should observe norms involving legitimate and peaceful ways of competing for influence, including the norm of nonaggression. Second, it means preserving and bolstering—and where appropriate due to changes in the relative power of states, revising and updating—the post–World War II liberal order that the United States did much to create and from which the United States has benefited greatly. Third, where the institutions of that order do not hold sway, the United States should

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function as part of balances of power. This can involve employing the hardest forms of hard power, but more often it should aim to persuade and deter rather than to coerce or destroy. The United States should use its power primarily to influence the decisions and policies of other governments, instead of trying to accomplish objectives directly by itself. It also should avoid the temptation of using its power to apply short-term fixes to troublesome situations when that may only leave behind the ingredients of long-term instability and extremism.

This approach requires overcoming two entrenched American tendencies. One is the inclination to perceive nails everywhere given that the United States has built a wonderful hammer in the form of a powerful military machine. The other is a perception of the world as divided between allies and adversaries, with power to be exerted only against the latter and in support of the former. We should instead remember that the true goal should be to promote the security and welfare of Americans, and this means freely deploying all the instruments of U.S. influence regardless of the label customarily applied to whatever country we are influencing.

Gideon Rachman

If I were American, I would be strongly tempted to be an isolationist.

It is clearly in Japan's interests that the United States should constrain China. It is clearly in the European Union's interests that the United States should face down Russia. It is clearly in Israel's interests that the United States should check Iran's regional ambitions.

But it is much less obvious that any of these actions are directly beneficial to the United States. Neither China nor Russia nor Iran poses a clear and present danger to America. But confronting these countries with "red lines" in their own backyards does create a genuine risk of war. The case for American isolationism is further strengthened by recent experiences with unsuccessful military interventions. After Iraq and Afghanistan, it would require culpable naïveté to expect that U.S. troops can sort out a Middle East that faces twenty years of turmoil. Finally, the prospect of American "energy independence" makes isolationism look economically feasible.

So the case for isolationism is clearly much stronger than it has been for many years. But, in the end, it is not conclusive.

The history of the twentieth century suggests that America is ultimately likely to get dragged into an armed conflict with a major authoritarian power bent on expansion. Simply ignoring such threats and hoping they won't cross the Atlantic or the Pacific is tempting—but probably unwise. Similarly, the twenty-first-century scourge of terrorism has already shown that it can hit the American mainland. If a group like the Islamic State were able to establish control over considerable amounts

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of territory for a period of years, it would be likely to turn its attentions to attacking U.S. interests in a more systematic way. In the hyperconnected world of the Internet, critical American infrastructure is also highly vulnerable to attack from overseas. The next 9/11 is just as likely to involve an attack on the power grid or America's financial infrastructure as on buildings or planes.

All of these factors—plus a degree of concern for freedom outside America—should prompt the United States to continue to use its might to prevent potential rivals, particularly authoritarian powers, from expanding their own power and influence.

This should not mean taking crazy risks that increase the chances of warfare. On the contrary, the United States should place less reliance on its formidable military—and instead concentrate on developing new forms of leverage.

Recent experiences with Iran (and even Russia) have suggested that economic sanctions are a more effective tool than conventional wisdom used to hold. In a globalized world, international businesses need access to the dollar area in order to survive. International elites also crave visas to the United States and the European Union for themselves and for their children. The American legal system also has a surprisingly long reach—as the recent arrests of (allegedly) corrupt FIFA officials in Switzerland demonstrated.

These are the kinds of instruments that America should turn to first as it exercises its power in the twenty-first century.

Gideon Rose

I reject the premise of the question, because I don't think the world is increasingly unstable. The purpose of American power today is the same as it has been for generations: to consolidate, protect and extend the liberal international order that emerged after World War II.

At the core of that order are democracies with mixed economies, peacefully cooperating and trading with each other while nestling closely under an American security umbrella. That core is embedded in a variety of overlapping institutional structures, from the Bretton Woods institutions and the United Nations, to NATO and the European Union, to an endless array of cooperative bilateral, regional and functional groupings. Because the order doesn't discriminate, any country that wants to join and is prepared to play by the rules is allowed in, making it a potentially universal alliance that is constantly expanding. And because the order has so many aspects and points of entry, countries not ready to sign up for the whole package at once can ease in over time, starting on the margins and progressing toward the core at their own pace.

This order has been the framework within which a great deal of economic, social and political development has proceeded around the globe, to the lasting benefit of both the United States and

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the world at large. Its basic outlines were sketched before the postwar break with the Soviet Union, so the end of the Cold War did much less to change the world than many expected, merely paving the way for the order's extension into areas of the world that were previously off-limits.

The George H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations competently pursued broadly similar policies that gave the order a new lease on life in new circumstances. The George W. Bush administration damaged it through reckless and incompetent adventurism. The Obama administration has tried to get it back on track by cutting its losses and avoiding major new missteps.

Today, even after a global financial crisis and some recent geopolitical challenges by Russia and China, the United States may be richer, stronger and safer than it has ever been; if not, it is certainly close to that. It spends more on defense than the next seven countries combined—and many of those countries are its close allies. It has unparalleled power-projection capabilities and a vast, globe-spanning intelligence network. It has the world's reserve currency, the world's largest economy and the highest growth rate of any major developed country. It has good demographics, manageable debt and dynamic, innovating companies that are the envy of the world. And it is at the center of an ever-expanding web of connections. Its few remaining rivals, meanwhile, have few allies, little soft power, and poor prospects for long-term stability or success.

The country's current bout of declinism, pessimism and paranoia has little grounding in reality. All U.S. foreign policy has to do is keep calm and carry on.

Paul J. Saunders

The purpose of American power is to defend and advance U.S. national interests, including preserving and strengthening American freedoms, facilitating continued economic growth and protecting the United States from attack.

Because the United States and our allies are the principal architects of an international system of which America is the primary beneficiary, it should be a central objective to maintain international order. This requires continuing U.S. leadership.

Moreover, the international system—and therefore U.S. national security as well as the stability necessary for expanding prosperity and promoting our values—is more vulnerable to conflict and tension between major powers than to local interstate or civil wars. Continuing intense competition between major powers both directly produces and indirectly facilitates local wars (not to mention regional or even world wars). And it generates wars in greater numbers, and of greater severity, than Washington can manage on an ongoing basis. It is thus far more efficient,

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and more humanitarian, to maintain stability by carefully managing great-power relations than by sequentially intervening in unending individual crises. Indeed, the latter approach has been exasperating for many Americans.

Despite this, conflicts like Syria's civil war and the fighting in eastern Ukraine have been disturbing. Limited U.S. involvement in each case has led some allies in the Middle East and Europe to question America's commitment to their security. Earlier, frequent but inconclusive interventions alienated major-power rivals, Russia and China, and failed to deter them.

The problem is that U.S. elites have increasingly defined leadership as the use of force: we are leaders when we drop bombs or deploy troops. When the public predictably tired of war, Americans rejected this "leadership." U.S. allies and rivals have seen this reaction, and the Obama administration's responses to it, and drawn their own conclusions.

What the United States needs is a new model of U.S. international leadership that rests more heavily on what others truly admire about America—our economic success and our free society. This approach will still require force, particularly when truly vital U.S. national interests are at stake. It will also require applying power without using force.

But no less important will be finding the right mix of inspiration, encouragement, cajolery and intimidation to manage the complex relationships among the world's satisfied and dissatisfied governments to ensure that most are satisfied—and that no combination of major powers becomes sufficiently dissatisfied to mount a sustained attempt to overturn the system. Notwithstanding their evident limits, the recent BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization summits in Ufa, Russia, illustrate the extent to which China, Russia and others are already frustrated, in different ways and to different degrees.

Ultimately, maintaining a stable international system will require finding a difficult balance between strength (through clear rules and determined enforcement) and flexibility (through compromise). A system that privileges strength will crack; one that relies too heavily on compromise will erode. The real question is not America's purpose, but whether our leaders—in either party—are capable of pursuing it.

Anne-Marie Slaughter

The purpose of American power is to advance American interests in the world. The real question, then, is how to define American interests. First are defensive interests: the protection of American territory and citizens and the safety and security of our allies. Second are the affirmative goals that we pursue in the world, which President Obama has identified as an open global economy, respect for universal human rights and a rule-governed international order. A

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world in which all human beings can trade and compete with one another openly and fairly; can think, speak, write and worship as they please; are free from both fear and want; and profit from the stability and predictability of an international as well as a domestic order is a world in which Americans can flourish.

Standing for such a world and working to promote it is not only an exercise of American power; it is a *source* of that power. It demonstrates that the credo of our founders—that *all* human beings are created equal and that all are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—is more than mere words. It is a set of values that binds together peoples from all over the globe. We must stand for those values in ways that do more good than harm, both for Americans and for those we would help. But we must also understand that we define our interests in moral as well as material terms, a definition that not only guides the use of our power but also augments the power we have available to use.

Ruth Wedgwood

American power is an offshore balancer—deterring pugilistic regimes that fancy the land or resources of neighbors, and serving as a caution to dictators possessed of outlandish ambitions. The global reach of America's navy and air force, the intelligence capability and readiness of our armed forces, and the attractiveness of our democratic form of government have allowed the United States to function as a cop on the block—a public service that was, in a more naive view, supposed to be undertaken by the United Nations.

To be sure, the American press has forsaken serious coverage of foreign affairs, and Washington's ability to influence the course of events through an overstretched foreign service is often limited. We have been mistakenly swayed by personalities—Washington's overripe infatuation with Rwandan strongman Paul Kagame is a case in point. But America's diverse population and the worldwide rise of Internet news sources have also permitted the United States to sound the alarm in human-rights crises through the press, diplomacy and the voices of NGOs. It was not by chance that the United Nations—with its convocation of all the governments of the world—was placed in New York as a central locus for negotiation and decision making.

Faced with unpredictable events and powerful adversaries—whether the forays of Putin's Russia in Ukraine or China's thrusts in the South China Sea—the United States may observe a necessary caution. But ultimately, it is the strength of the American economy, the robustness of its military capability and the attractiveness of its ultimate commitment to human rights that allow this New World power to claim

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an outsize public role in keeping the peace and sustaining economic growth.

Robert B. Zoellick

My first professor of diplomatic history directed the class to study the back of the one-dollar bill. His aim was not to suggest the commercial motivations of American foreign policy, but instead to help us find the Great Seal of the United States, which is conveniently printed on the back of the dollar.

In seeking the approval of that seal in June 1782, Charles Thomson, secretary of the U.S. Congress, explained that the reverse portrays an uncompleted thirteen-tiered pyramid of states, overseen by the eye of Providence. The Virgilian phrase above the image, "Annuit Coeptis," reveals that a higher force has favored our undertaking. Thomson observed that the phrase below the pyramid, "Novus Ordo Seclorum" (New Order of the Ages), signified "the beginning of a new American era" that commenced with the Declaration of Independence in 1776. As James A. Field explained, "It remains unclear whether [Thomson's use of] the adjective 'American' is to be construed as geographically limiting or as broadly descriptive . . . [and] much of American history is implicit in this question."

The Declaration of Independence states that governments are instituted to secure certain unalienable rights for all people, among them life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The U.S. Constitution prescribes the powers of the American government, and the Bill of Rights specifies limits on those powers.

I believe this work of the Founding Fathers suggests that the purpose of American power is to safeguard Americans, form a more perfect union, protect constitutional rights and enable Americans to pursue the fruits of their liberties—while furthering a wider order that respects free individuals, just governments and the common qualities of humankind.

Over the span of the last two hundred years, the power of the American state has reached heights that would have been inconceivable to the Founders. I believe they would be proud of twenty-first-century America, but also cautionary: suggesting that governmental power should be exercised with restraint, while individual initiative should be encouraged, at home and abroad. With "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind," the Founders would urge their inheritors to explain America's opinion, while never shrinking from pursuing the country's reasoned beliefs. The most cherished belief is an exceptional one—that America's greatest power is to be found in the dynamism of its citizens, and that the intrepid spirit of Americans will shape future eras within our country and around the world.

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