

# RESTRAINING ORDER

*For Strategic Modesty*

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Even in an era of globalization, when information, people, goods, services, and, yes, weapons, armies, and terrorists may travel much more efficiently than in the past, geography still matters. At the start of the Cold War, the United States chose to relinquish the protection given by wide ocean buffers and relatively unthreatening neighbors to protect poor and depleted European and Asian allies whose own geography made them vulnerable to Soviet expansion. Today, however, the Cold War is long over, these allies have grown prosperous, and it's time for America to reclaim its strategic depth.

The Cold War left a legacy that has been difficult for Americans to transcend. The global network of American bases and military commands is ready for use, and many U.S. allies, despite their posturing complaints about U.S. policy, often encourage our interventionism as a way of ducking responsibility for maintaining their own security. It is also true that post-Cold War conflicts that developed in or near the collapsed Soviet empire, and the violent ethnic rivalries and failed states of Africa and Asia, have tempted U.S. intervention. When President Obama and other policymakers claim that security is indivisible—that instability anywhere

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threatens American security and prosperity everywhere—they are saying that the United States must undertake the burden because someone has to do it.

The United States would be better off pursuing a different grand strategy, one that would regain the advantages of our geography and accustom our friends once again to carrying the responsibility for their own security. Though we are the globe's strongest nation—with a very powerful military, the world's largest economy, and an enticing culture—we have neither the need nor the resources to manage everyone else's security. We can meet the challenges of globalization and terrorism without being the self-appointed and self-financed global police force.

Restraint would offer the opportunity to reinvigorate the foundations of America's strength. Foreign distractions, among other causes, have led the United States to neglect its transportation infrastructure, its educational system, its finances, and its technology base. If we were to restrain the global interventionism that has become our second nature since the end of World War II, we could ensure our safety while preserving our power to deal more precisely with threats that may materialize in an uncertain future.

The first virtue of a restraint strategy is that it husbands American power. It acknowledges both America's great strengths—a combination of human and physical resources unmatched in the world—and the limitations of our power, which is easily dissipated in wasteful attempts to manage global security.

No nation or ideology now menaces American security in the same ways or to the same degree that the Soviet Union and Communism did during the Cold War. Instead, a variety of ethnic, religious, and nationalistic conflicts oceans away from us now obsess our policymakers, even though those conflicts have little to no prospect of spreading our way. To be sure, radical Islamists have attacked Americans at home and abroad, and while these attackers should be hunted down, they do not pose an existential threat, only a difficult and distracting one. Killing or capturing the criminals who attack Americans makes sense; trying to fix the failed states they call home is hopeless and unnecessary. The United States is safer than ever. The challenge now is staying safe.

The U.S. military is supposed to stand between America and hostile nations, but its forward deployment actually puts our forces between others and their own enemies. Alliances once meant to hold a coalition together against a common foe now protect foreign nations from adversaries that in most cases have no direct dispute with the United States. Although our allies are capable of fending

for themselves, the fact that they can take shelter under an American umbrella allows them to defer taking responsibility for their own security. The United States should now use tough love to get our allies off our security dole. We need to do less so others will do more.

Restraint should not be confused with pacifism. Calling for America to come home is different today than it was during the Cold War, when there was a world to lose. Today it is not a call for capitulation or disarmament, though it does provide an opportunity for force reductions. The restraint strategy requires a powerful, full-spectrum, and deployable military that invests heavily in technology and uses realistic training to improve capabilities and deter challenges. Restraint demands a military with a global reach that is sparingly used.

Similarly, restraint is not isolationism. Isolation avoids economic and diplomatic engagement and eschews potential profits from the global economy and the enrichment that sharing ideas and cultures can offer. The United States would be foolish to decline these opportunities. Restraint does not mean retreating from history, but merely ending U.S. efforts to try to manage it. Restraint would rebalance global responsibilities among America and its allies, match our foreign objectives to our abilities, and put domestic needs first.

A strategy of restraint would treat alliances as a means, not an end. Alliances are a way of sharing the price of working toward strategic goals. Three conditions should be met for the United States to enter—or retain—an alliance.

- Does the potential partner need American help? If it has not tried to manage a given situation with its own resources or regional partners, then the United States should demur.
- Secondly, is it in America's immediate interest to help, or alternatively, does the partner especially deserve American help? The United States should continue to work closely with countries with whom it has a special relationship or to whom it owes a special debt, in addition to those countries with which the United States shares a pressing strategic dilemma or opportunity.
- Finally, can the United States constructively engage or intervene? U.S. assistance only makes sense when practical actions are likely to improve

the situation. Because preserving alliances is not itself an important goal of the restraint strategy, no alliance should be permanent.

As global threats and opportunities evolve, American alliances should also evolve. More broadly, the United States should recognize a variety of positive relationships with other countries beyond the special category of ally. A policy of restraint means cooperating with other countries at a less intense level through ad hoc coalitions, friendly diplomatic engagement, trade agreements, cultural exchanges, and other means.

Policymakers should consider both the opportunities and the *costs* of alliances. Alliances are like off-balance-sheet liabilities whose risks only show up as costs on the rare occasions when the alliances get involved in high-profile crises and conflicts. Under the current dispensation, we often extend guarantees to our allies without considering the huge payouts.

Alliances are costly for another reason. They cause us to spread our military assets around the world, giving potential enemies U.S. targets in their own backyards rather than forcing them to pay the price of attacking the United States by crossing the oceans that separate us from them.

Moreover, policymakers generally ignore the investments alliances require in a larger U.S. force structure. In the past, politicians have often explained that America's partners help pay the cost of basing the American military—a propo-

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sition that was always questionable but is certainly not true today as American forces shift to Eastern European, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian bases. American taxpayers often pay for basing rights rather than being paid for the military shield they provide our allies. (Even when

Japan and Germany shared the burden of paying for Cold War bases, the United States paid full cost to train, equip, and develop the power-projection forces suited to America's established, long-term alliance commitments.)

Under a strategy of restraint, the United States would stop giving away American support. During the Cold War, interventionists could credibly argue

that the vulnerability of allies was a direct threat to the United States, so we could not, for instance, afford to gamble that West Germany would resist Soviet blandishments if America's military shield was diminished or withdrawn altogether. Because everyone knew that we would ultimately come to the defense of a crucial ally, no matter how disloyal its diplomatic behavior or how small its defense investment, the United States was often hogtied in its alliances. Today, our own security is not so inseparably linked to that of our allies; the threats they face are less severe than in the Cold War, and they can afford to defend themselves.

Under a policy of restraint, the United States would remain deeply enmeshed in the global economy. U.S. firms will continue to sell their products abroad as eagerly as they do now, and consumers around the world will still buy American products. Nor would the adoption of restraint affect the movement of global capital. American investors will still seek high returns abroad, and foreigners will still invest in the United States.

Some policy analysts suggest that political instability abroad would disrupt the global economy, interfering with trade and investment. They presume that growing economic interdependence means that the United States has an economic interest in policing the globe.

Although globalization heightens economic ties between countries, those ties mitigate U.S. vulnerability to overseas shocks. Globalization has multiplied the *alternatives* for almost every economic relationship. There are now alternative suppliers for the goods we consume, alternative consumers for the products we manufacture, alternative locations in which we can invest, and alternative sources of capital for our firms. A common metaphor for the global economy—a complex web—is on the mark. The structure of that web can survive even if a few strands are severed. Profit-seeking actors respond quickly to disruptions by searching for the next-best alternative. If there is trouble in the Strait of Malacca, ships will quickly reroute through the nearly-as-convenient Straits of Lombok or Makassar. If disruptions abroad make it harder to sell U.S. bicycles in Korea, manufacturers will sell them in Portugal. Because of globalization, the United States depends more on access to the global economy as a whole but depends less on any specific economic relationship.

The oil market seems to stand out as an exception. Disruptions to oil supply routinely cause huge price spikes and painful adjustments. But the danger of oil disruptions does not require that Washington police the Middle East; rather, the United States ought to retain large stockpiles of oil and other critical materials.

The U.S. government has already amassed approximately 700 million barrels of oil. If you add the stockpiles in the European Union, Japan, South Korea, and China, the total for the industrialized world is approximately 1.5 billion barrels of oil. And those are only government-controlled stocks; most analysts believe private holdings exceed official stockpiles. When one compares these massive reserves against plausible disruptions, government-controlled stockpiles alone count as more than sufficient to maintain global supply.

The extreme flexibility of the global economy adds to restraint's appeal as a strategy for the United States. The global economy is not a rigid chain with links that must be protected. It is a flexible, constantly changing web that needs no global policeman to direct its traffic.

Three guidelines would shape U.S. counterterrorism policy under a strategy of restraint. The first is the importance of discernment, because we create enemies by too loosely defining who they are. The second is that a foreign policy that is less active in the Muslim world will diminish terrorism directed against Americans. The third is that counterterrorism should be mainly a policing and intelligence exercise. Military force has a role, but the over-militarization of counterterrorism wastes resources and likely will generate more problems than it solves.

The restraint strategy distinguishes terrorists who attack the United States from those who do not. We should work with states around the world to combat all terrorists—those who intentionally target noncombatants. The U.S. government should share information on suspected terrorists with other states, track their movements across borders, freeze their bank accounts, arrest them when they enter U.S. territory, and encourage other nations' counterterrorism efforts.

Terrorists who target America and its citizens are another matter. In pursuing them, a restraint strategy would employ all of the above policy tools while also pressuring countries to act against these organizations within their own borders. If a host country is unable or unwilling to hunt terrorists who attack America, the United States itself should act. That could include covert action directed at the terrorists, air strikes, small-scale raids, or in extreme circumstances an invasion.

By contrast, declaring war on terrorists who do not target Americans invites obscure violent groups around the world to make us their enemies. A lack of discrimination in choosing whom to attack also strengthens terrorists by granting them recognition and encourages alliances between otherwise separate terror groups. Our enemy today, for instance, is not Islam, not Islamism, not Islamic

fundamentalism, not Wahabism, not Salafists, and not even jihadists, per se. Our enemies are those who attack Americans and those who shelter them.

Most jihadists are fighting their local governments. In the long term, their struggle will probably fail. But their defeat will have to come at the hands of their compatriots, not from the liberal forces led by the United States. American participation in the political conflicts in the Islamic world makes the United States a target of the terrorists involved in those conflicts, and American involvement feeds the conspiracy theories that make supposed evildoers in Washington the excuse for all that goes wrong in the Middle East. Non-intervention in Middle Eastern politics should not be regarded as appeasement, but as a key component of counterterrorism.

In the rare circumstances in which the United States needs to invade or even occupy part of the Muslim world, as in Afghanistan, the U.S. military should diminish its footprint and limit its stay. The United States should not shrink from stating that we believe that liberal democracy is a good form of government, but we should model democracy rather than insisting that others adopt it. Though we should not be mute in the face of egregious human rights violations, Americans should stop telling people in the Muslim world how to run their countries.

Overseas, foreign intelligence organizations and policemen collect the most useful counterterrorism intelligence and do most of the work apprehending and interrogating terrorists, because they have local contacts and language skills. The United States should continue to provide intelligence support, particularly technical support, to these foreign counterterrorist agencies. Such cooperation may occasionally cause the kind of blowback that a policy of restraint seeks to avoid, but in cases like Pakistan's, where the terrorist threat is high enough, the benefit of intelligence cooperation outweighs this cost. In any case, the blowback from cooperation with law enforcement and intelligence agencies will be much less severe than that generated by the current American strategy with its emphasis on military force and occupation.

The principal military role in counterterrorism should be the use of special operations forces to assist foreign governments in attacking anti-American terrorists. In some circumstances, U.S. special forces might direct air strikes or directly attack terrorist facilities when local forces are unable or unwilling to do so. But locals should take the lead.

Restraint also rejects the idea that fixing failed states is a good way to protect America. Failed states are rarely hospitable sanctuaries for terrorists—they inevitably get dragged into local fighting. The Afghanistan example is often deployed

to warn of the danger of failed states, but al-Qaeda was a guest of the country's leaders, the Taliban. The problem was not state failure, but state support. Equally important, failed states are usually produced by deep political cleavages, which the United States cannot easily fix with a military intervention. Rather than try to solve the problem of state failure—which needlessly ensnares the United States in faraway disputes—Washington should act against terrorist groups who plan to attack Americans. A more preventive approach will simply produce hostility and run up bills.

A common objection to the strategy of restraint is that the absence of U.S. security guarantees and troops abroad will impel more nations to fend for themselves and therefore build nuclear weapons, heightening proliferation. What this view misses is that U.S. military hegemony is as likely to encourage nuclear proliferation, as states balance against us, as to prevent it. In addition, this objection exaggerates the dangers of proliferation. The spread of nuclear weapons does not necessarily threaten the United States. Indeed, the acquisition of nuclear forces by some of our friends will enhance their security and dampen their desire for American guarantees. Even the spread of nuclear weapons to so-called rogue states is not overly threatening because we can deter them.

America's non-proliferation efforts should focus on terrorists, whom we doubt can be reliably deterred. Fortunately, developing nuclear weapons is not easy for a terrorist group. They face financial constraints, major technical challenges (Pyongyang's experience refutes the canard that it is simple to build an A-bomb), and trouble hiding their activities from intelligence and police surveillance. U.S. intelligence agencies should continue to exploit these difficulties—launching sting operations to catch rogue states or individuals who seek to pass nuclear material to terror groups and direct action against terrorists who demonstrate an interest in obtaining such weapons.

Each of the two main strategic alternatives to restraint, primacy and global engagement, suffers from major flaws. Primacists seek to contain peer-competitors to America, especially China. They hope to dissuade Beijing from building a military to match its growing economic power. Some even want to destabilize the Beijing government by accelerating China's liberalization in ways that would make modernization difficult to control, or by trying to embarrass the government (militarily or otherwise) in a way that would cause decades of political and economic disarray.

Such an anti-China strategy is unwise. First, it is far from guaranteed that China will continue its economic rise or successfully manage the social strains that its government already faces. And a policy of active containment (let alone a policy of destabilization) may even make it easy for leaders in Beijing to rally nationalist sentiment against the United States and distract attention from their own failings. This sort of anti-China strategy accomplishes only one thing for sure: it turns tomorrow's potential adversary into today's certain one.

A second strategic alternative to restraint is to continue America's muddled approach to international politics: global engagement, often mistakenly called

"selective engagement."

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Advocates of this policy seek to protect the U.S. economy, as well as other overseas interests, by enhancing international law and order. In this telling, the United States is the sheriff, working with locals to

keep the outlaws at bay while institutions for global governance take root.

This strategy vastly overstates America's ability to engineer the global system. We lack the expertise to manage distant corners of the world, and our efforts too often fan nationalist and tribal opposition. Ordering the world according to our liking involves picking winners and losers. The losers will blame us for their problems, the winners will resent our role in their success, and both sides will blame us when things go awry.

Global activism costs us in two other crucial ways. First, it forces us to violate our values when local stability requires tactical alliances with unsavory regimes. Second, it discourages our friends from becoming self-reliant, leaving us with weaker partners when we truly need them. Restraint better protects American interests.

Implementing a strategy of restraint will be difficult because it requires us to overcome a belief that became ingrained in our worldview during the Cold War: the assumption that if we did not manage security affairs in every corner of the globe we would find ourselves on the defensive in a great ideological and military contest. Americans have learned to think it is our duty to fret over conditions in

the Baltics, the Balkans, the Bosphorus, the Beqaa valley, the Persian Gulf, the Pashtun region, Thailand, Taiwan, and East Timor. Almost every country, no matter how small, distant, or unfamiliar, has been labeled “strategic” by some American official.

The second obstacle to overcome is our global military command structure. The geographically based commands reflexively lobby for involvement in their regions. Their plans drive our thinking about larger national security issues and impose unbounded demands on our resources. Regional commanders overshadow our diplomats and overburden our defense budget. The more Unified Combatant Commands the United States has, the longer the list of certified threats and the less flexible our ability to respond due to the earmarking of forces. Doing away with the regional commands will improve strategic planning and our ability to weigh challenges and allocate our limited resources.

Some U.S. overseas bases vital to ongoing operations may have to be retained. Continuing arrangements with a few other nations may be necessary for fleet access. But a network of forward bases gives us an incentive to meddle and advertises our willingness to defend our hosts. We have been gradually reducing our global military presence for two decades. It is time to complete the mission. A homecoming for American forces would be a clear statement of our intent to follow a new grand strategy.

Restraint would also allow reductions in defense spending and force structure and help us realign military spending. For instance, restraint reduces the likelihood that the United States will find itself conducting two simultaneous high-intensity ground wars. The balance in forces should shift accordingly, and ground forces would absorb more than a proportional share of cuts. The United States spends vastly more on defense than any other country, and despite the cuts will retain military dominance in air, ground, and naval combat.

A defense strategy of restraint would allow us to again make use of the natural barriers that separate us from most sources of danger in the world. That strategy encourages our allies to defend themselves. It stops us from occupying foreign countries under the misguided perception that we can and ought to remake them. It diminishes the perception abroad that the United States has become a revolutionary power bent on remaking the world, and it demonstrates that we intend to spread liberal values by example rather than force. This strategy husbands our power rather than wasting it fighting conflicts that need not involve us.

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*RESTRAINING ORDER: FOR STRATEGIC MODESTY*

An America that is not on call for every conflict that breaks out in every corner of the world will have the time and resources to address the financial and infrastructure issues that weaken our domestic health and international power. The burden of providing security for others long after the need disappeared has simply caused us to neglect too much at home. More watchful waiting and less international meddling will preserve our security and wealth. We need to reclaim our strategic depth and stop our friends from free riding on our military. It is, finally, time to come home. ♻