

ONE

THE PRETTY SUCCESSFUL SUPERPOWER

The post–Cold War era has now lasted over a quarter century—longer than the period between the world wars and more than half as long as the Cold War itself. This period, moreover, has been no quiet or restful time in American grand strategy. The United States did not withdraw from the world after the Soviet collapse, or even become a more “normal” country, as some observers advocated at the time. Rather, it recommitted itself to pursuing a globalism every bit as ambitious and energetic as during the bipolar era. Today, at a time when the international order is often thought to be reaching a new inflection point, when the debate over America’s global role is more heated than at any time since the early 1990s, and when the political rise and presidency of Donald Trump have injected great uncertainty into U.S. policy, it is worth considering what insights the experience of the post–Cold War era has to offer.

AMERICAN GRAND STRATEGY IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

Unfortunately, discussions of America's post-Cold War grand strategy are afflicted by three misconceptions that have become conventional wisdom among critics of U.S. foreign policy. The first is that, with the end of the Cold War, America broke dramatically with its previous grand strategic tradition and undertook a radically new approach to the world. The second is that America's post-Cold War grand strategy has been ineffective and even quixotic—that Washington has essentially squandered the position of preeminence it attained with the Soviet collapse. The third is that this period of U.S. primacy is now over, and that American leaders have no choice but to retrench fundamentally as a result.¹

All three ideas are more myth than reality; they obscure more than they illuminate. The United States did not embrace a radically new grand strategy after the Cold War; it simply adapted its long-standing post-World War II grand strategy to a new era of American dominance. That endeavor was hardly fruitless or self-defeating; on balance, it has helped ensure that the post-Cold War system has been far more stable, more liberal, and more congenial to U.S. interests than many leading observers predicted as that era began. Finally, although Washington currently faces more—and more pressing—challenges to its international superiority than at any time since 1991, it is premature to conclude that the age of American primacy has passed. The time has not come for radical retrenchment of the sort proposed by many leading academics and championed in Trump's campaign rhetoric. The proper course, rather, is to do what is necessary to sustain the grand strategy that America has pursued, more or less successfully, over the past quarter century.

NOT SO RADICAL

We often think of the end of the Cold War as a fundamental point of departure in America's approach to the world.² Yet the grand strategy that successive administrations pursued after 1991 is best

seen as the logical extension of an approach that originated decades before, following World War II. For U.S. officials, World War II demonstrated the basic interdependence of the world environment and the corresponding need to define national security in broad, indeed global, terms. Accordingly, the postwar decades saw a sustained American activism designed to mold the external environment—to construct an overarching international order congenial to America’s security as well as to its liberal values.

To this end, and throughout the postwar era, American officials consistently promoted an open, liberal economy that would foster U.S. and global prosperity, and they sought to preserve a peaceful international environment in which democracy and human rights could flourish. They worked to create stability and security in key regions from Europe to the Middle East to East Asia, to bind key countries in these areas to the United States both geopolitically and economically, and to prevent any hostile power from dominating these regions either by force or otherwise. They strove to maintain an overall global balance of power that favored America and its Western allies, and to contain and ultimately roll back the influence of aggressive authoritarian states that threatened these various objectives. In support of this basic design, U.S. policymakers undertook a range of global commitments, from security guarantees and forward military deployments to leadership of international trade pacts and institutions. These commitments were unprecedented in U.S. history, and they were designed to project American influence into key regions and issues around the world. During the Cold War, these endeavors helped to foster a thriving international order in the noncommunist world, and to contain—and ultimately defeat—the rival order Moscow sought to create in the socialist bloc.³

When the Cold War ended, then, U.S. officials did not have to go back to the drawing board or chart a radical new course in America’s approach to the world. They needed, rather, simply to adapt the country’s successful postwar grand strategy to a new age of U.S.

and Western supremacy. The United States emerged from the Cold War with clear military, economic, and diplomatic primacy, and at the head of a Western coalition that commanded a vast majority of global power. In these circumstances, Washington effectively doubled down on the core objectives—and many of the specific initiatives—that comprised its postwar statecraft.

The long-standing goal of maintaining favorable balances of power both globally and within key regions, for instance, became one of locking in the remarkable U.S. and Western overmatch that the Soviet collapse had produced. The goal of fostering an environment in which democracy could flourish evolved to include more actively and directly promoting democratic institutions in countries around the globe. The goal of creating a robust liberal economy in the noncommunist world became one of promoting ever-deeper integration in the “first world,” while spreading market concepts and institutions into the former second and third worlds. And the goal of containing and ultimately defeating the Soviet Union became one of preventing any new threat—international terrorism, nuclear proliferation, the actions of aggressive “rogue states,” or the potential resurgence of tensions within key geopolitical regions such as Europe or East Asia—from rising to the level of the former Soviet menace or otherwise bringing the good times to an end.

In sum, America’s post-Cold War grand strategy might best be characterized as one of preserving the geopolitical primacy that America’s postwar statecraft had helped deliver, deepening and extending the liberal order that had taken hold in the West during the superpower competition, and suppressing those dangers, whether extant or prospective, that threatened to disrupt such a benign international environment. This strategy was first explicitly spelled out in the Pentagon’s 1992 Defense Planning Guidance, a document specifically intended to chart America’s course for decades to come. And despite the hysteria at the time, stimulated by the leak of an early version of the document, recent scholarship has emphasized

that this approach was subsequently adopted—with some variation in focus, tone, and emphasis—by every post-Cold War administration that followed.⁴

This strategy, moreover, was pursued by concrete means and initiatives that represented continuity as much as change. For a quarter century, every post-Cold War administration remained committed to maintaining America's globe-straddling military posture, so as to deter or defeat emerging challenges and provide the hard-power backbone of the unipolar international order. Similarly, every post-Cold War administration preserved and even extended America's Cold War-era alliances and security commitments, in order to lock in stability and U.S. influence in key regions, to hedge against the reemergence of hostile great powers, and to provide a security envelope to enable additional countries (in eastern Europe, for example) to integrate into the liberal order. In fact, the first four post-Cold War leaders—George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama—all presided over successive expansions of NATO while affirming U.S. guarantees in other regions as well.

With respect to the global economy, each of these administrations pursued international economic integration through the institutionalization of liberal economic practices, the liberalization of global currency and capital flows, and the pursuit of free trade agreements, from NAFTA in the early 1990s to the Trans-Pacific Partnership under Obama. And all of these administrations continued to contain and confront aggressive actors that threatened the smooth functioning of the international system, from Saddam Hussein's Iraq to a perpetually provocative North Korea, through a mixture of economic, diplomatic, and military means. Finally, even in those cases where U.S. policy did become more assertive following the Cold War—as in the case of promoting democracy—that policy followed essential precedents set by Cold War-era initiatives from the Marshall Plan to the encouragement

of liberal political reforms by the Carter and Reagan administrations.⁵ American statecraft from the early 1990s onward did not break sharply with the past; it simply built upon the foundations laid by a successful, multidecade postwar grand strategy.

Of course, none of this is to say that there was *no* change in American strategy after the Cold War or that there was perfect consistency across post-Cold War administrations. The U.S. government did certainly take on some new endeavors in the unipolar era, perhaps the most notable being the practice of humanitarian military intervention—which had generally been deemed an unaffordable luxury during the Cold War—in countries ranging from Somalia to Libya. After 9/11, moreover, the *assertiveness* with which the United States pursued many of its goals—from democracy promotion to counterterrorism and counterproliferation—jumped significantly, as manifested most clearly in the invasion of Iraq. And from George H. W. Bush to Barack Obama, U.S. presidential administrations differed on many things, from their rhetorical styles to their approaches to using military force.

Yet focusing on these differences obscures the basic continuity of purpose running through U.S. post-Cold War grand strategy, as well as the extent to which that grand strategy and many of its specific manifestations have been rooted in the broader tradition of postwar statecraft. In 1950, the authors of NSC-68 stated that efforts “to foster a world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish” constituted “a policy which we would probably pursue even if there were no Soviet threat.”⁶ The trajectory of American grand strategy after the Cold War, as well as during it, illustrates the truth of this statement.

NOT SO BAD AFTER ALL

A second myth regarding America’s post-Cold War grand strategy is that this strategy has proved quixotic and even “disastrous”—

that Washington has wasted its remarkable primacy by tilting at geopolitical windmills.⁷ The same critique was often made by Donald Trump on his road to the White House in 2016.⁸ This verdict, of course, is influenced heavily by America's long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, embroilments that consumed much American power but produced unsatisfying and, on occasion, remarkably counterproductive outcomes. And in the post-Cold War period, as in any other, it is easy to identify mistakes of omission and commission, failures of conception and implementation, examples of hubris and consequent blowback. From the humiliating failure of U.S. intervention in Somalia in 1993 to the fallout from an initially successful intervention in Libya in 2011, there is plenty to lament and criticize.

But if self-criticism is generally an admirable quality—and Americans are practiced from of old with the jeremiad—there is also a more positive, and more accurate, way of viewing the past quarter century. And that is to note that, for all its travails, American strategy has played a central role in making the post-Cold War international system more stable, more liberal, and more favorable to U.S. interests and ideals than it would otherwise have been—and certainly in bringing about a more benign international environment than many expert observers expected when the post-Cold War period began. Just as it is now widely accepted that America's Cold War grand strategy was broadly successful despite the myriad frustrations and failures that occurred along the way (a catastrophically counterproductive war in Vietnam being the most significant), it is clear that, when it comes to shaping the international system, the overall record of America's post-Cold War engagement has been fairly impressive.

To grasp this point, go back to some of the most prominent forecasts about the future of international politics made just after the Cold War's end. There were certainly some sunny predictions, Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis being the most prominent.⁹ But there were also some very dark and pessimistic ones.

Most leading international relations theorists initially believed, for example, that the unipolarity America enjoyed following the superpower conflict was inherently unsustainable—that it would promptly cause renewed great-power balancing and the rise of countervailing coalitions.¹⁰ Many such observers—and also policy-makers from around the world—worried that the end of the Cold War would lead not to a stable, liberal peace, but to vicious, multipolar instability. The argument was, in essence, that bipolarity had suppressed sources of violence and anarchy in international affairs; its collapse would unleash a flurry of destabilizing influences. A revanchist Japan and Germany, the emergence of febrile security competitions in Europe and East Asia, rampant nuclear proliferation and aggressive behavior in the world's key strategic theaters: these were among the pernicious phenomena that leading analysts expected to materialize after bipolarity's demise. "We will soon miss the Cold War," John Mearsheimer famously warned. "The prospect of major crises, even wars . . . is likely to increase dramatically now that the Cold War is receding into history."¹¹

Yet whatever the imperfections of the post-Cold War era (and there have been many), what is striking is that these dogs mostly did not bark. By most meaningful historical comparisons, the quarter century after the Cold War was a time of relative international peace, stability, and liberal progress. Until recently, for instance, great-power tensions remained remarkably low-key compared to the Cold War or to any period dating back to the Concert of Europe. Regions such as East Asia and Europe have been mostly free of interstate conflict, and German or Japanese revanchism has been conspicuously absent. Nuclear proliferation, both extant (North Korea) and prospective (Iran), remains a serious concern, but on the whole it has advanced much more slowly than many predicted. Several countries actually gave up their nuclear weapons or weapons programs in the early and mid-1990s, and the proliferation spirals that were feared in key regions have yet to materialize.

The Pretty Successful Superpower

Meanwhile, democracy continued its advance after the Cold War, with the number of electoral democracies growing from 76 in 1990 to about 120 in the early 2000s.¹² Economic integration and the spread of free markets continued apace, and global living standards continued to rise in the aggregate, even as the gains of that prosperity were shared unequally. Not least, predictions of a rapid return to unstable multipolarity proved mistaken. Instead, the United States retained a vast economic and military lead over any competitor through the end of the millennium and beyond, and many of the world's second- and third-tier powers generally chose to cast their lots with rather than against it.¹³ There remained opposition to American power, of course, some of it murderously violent, and some of it partially generated by America's own policies. And from mass-casualty terrorism to ethnic violence, there also remained significant sources of tension and conflict. But relative to what many expected—and certainly relative to previous eras—the post-Cold War period wasn't half bad.

There were numerous reasons for this, some of which had little to do with American strategy or policies. But international politics are prominently shaped by the policies of the system's leading power, and after the Cold War the United States had as much capacity to shape the system as any other great power in modern history. This being so, it is hard to escape the conclusion that U.S. grand strategy—which was specifically geared toward preventing renewed conflict and instability and driving forward the positive trends at work—played an essential role in making the post-Cold War order as benign as it has been.

Consider just a few ways in which American strategy influenced the post-Cold War world. The maintenance of U.S. military presence and alliances in Europe and East Asia helped tamp down potential instability and security competitions, and kept historical powers such as Japan and Germany anchored firmly in the West.¹⁴ With the U.S. presence still in place, there was no need for these or

other key countries to provide fully for their own security, which markedly reduced the incentives for them to engage in arms-racing and other kinds of destabilizing behavior that defined previous eras. Likewise, the extension of American alliance commitments to eastern Europe helped smother incipient conflicts and security dilemmas following the breakdown of Soviet hegemony, and reduced incentives for nuclear proliferation or major military build-ups by historically insecure states such as Poland or Romania.¹⁵ In the Balkans, U.S.-led military interventions between 1995 and 1999 were admittedly belated and hesitant, and incurred a great deal of domestic criticism. But nonetheless, they helped end ethnic cleansing of vulnerable populations and doused persistent conflicts before they could destabilize southeastern Europe more broadly.

Nor were these the only areas where U.S. policy had such effects. In the former Soviet space, a forward-leaning American diplomacy helped achieve the denuclearization of Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan (all of which had inherited sizable nuclear arsenals from the dying Soviet Union), and dramatically reduced the danger of “loose nukes” by helping Russian officials secure poorly guarded nuclear materials.¹⁶ And in dealing with international outlaws such as Iraq or North Korea, U.S. policy prevented them from dominating or further destabilizing key regions. For all the problems that Saddam Hussein posed for regional and international security from the early 1990s onward, for instance, it was U.S. policy that reversed his aggression against Kuwait in 1990–91, and it was U.S. policy that kept his dangerous and megalomaniacal regime largely bottled up in the years thereafter. In sum, American engagement suppressed renascent geopolitical competition and upheaval in key areas and provided the reassurance that permitted global economic integration and other positive trends to continue.

U.S. policy affected the contours of the post–Cold War order in other ways, too. Direct U.S. engagement helped create and strengthen international economic institutions such as the World

Trade Organization, foster an array of regional and bilateral free trade pacts, and bring the single most important non-Western economy, China, into the international economic order to an unprecedented degree. In countries from Guatemala in the early 1990s to Georgia in the early 2000s, U.S. support helped strengthen democratic reformers, pressure authoritarian rulers, and promote political liberalization.¹⁷ Finally, and not least, the fact that the United States maintained relatively robust military spending from the early 1990s on, and that it continued to provide global public goods such as security and freedom of the seas so that other countries did not have to, helped ensure that the international order did not swing back toward unstable multipolarity in the early twenty-first century.

American policy was not solely responsible for these developments, but it was the single common thread that tied them together. If the goal of America's post-Cold War strategy was to sustain and deepen a stable, liberal order in which the United States enjoyed global primacy, then that strategy would have to be considered, on balance, a success.

NOT OVER YET

But does America still enjoy that primacy, and can it sustain such an engaged and ambitious strategy in the future? The answer one increasingly hears is no. The world, many say, is rapidly entering a new era of multipolarity, and Washington has no choice but to retrench. "This time it's real," writes one scholar: American supremacy is vanishing fast.¹⁸

This argument is not baseless, for America's margin of superiority has slipped from its post-Cold War peak. In 1994, the United States accounted for nearly one-fourth of global GDP and 40 percent of world military spending, with those numbers rising even higher by the early 2000s. By 2015, however, these statistics had fallen—not dramatically, but not trivially—to 22.4 percent of global GDP

and 33.8 percent of world military spending. The share of global wealth and power wielded by America's core treaty allies had also declined, from roughly 47 percent of global GDP and 35 percent of global military spending in 1994 to roughly 39 and 25 percent, respectively, in 2015. Meanwhile, the share wielded by the chief challenger to American primacy rose dramatically. In 1994, China accounted for just 3.3 percent of global GDP and 2.2 percent of world military spending; by 2015 two decades of booming economic growth and double-digit annual increases in military spending had taken those numbers to 11.8 and 12.2 percent, respectively.¹⁹ By these common measures of global power, the world is not as unbalanced as it used to be.

As the global power gap has narrowed, Washington has also been faced with more—and arguably more severe—threats to its position and interests than at any time since the Cold War. Great-power competition has returned, as Russia and China test the contours of an order that they never fully accepted, and that they now have greater capacity—economic, military, or both—to challenge. Moscow and Beijing are seeking to assert primacy within their own regions, probing the distant peripheries of the U.S. alliance system, and developing military capabilities that severely threaten America's ability to project power and uphold its security commitments in eastern Europe and the western Pacific. China's antiship ballistic missiles and its coercion of its neighbors, like Russia's hybrid-warfare activities and its anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, represent growing challenges to U.S. military superiority in key areas of Eurasia, and to the benign regional orders Washington has sought to maintain.²⁰

Meanwhile, the long-standing challenge of handling rogue actors has also become more difficult as those actors have become more empowered. North Korea boasts a sizable nuclear arsenal and is rapidly developing a reliable intercontinental strike capability with which to underwrite its serial provocations.²¹ Iran is fanning

sectarianism, fighting multiple proxy wars, and destabilizing an already-disordered Middle East as it also emerges from punishing international sanctions. The Islamic State is losing ground militarily, but it has shown the capacity of nonstate actors to sow chaos across a crucial region while also spreading and inspiring terrorism across the globe. The world is ablaze, it sometimes seems. In virtually every key region, the United States confronts rising challenges to the post-Cold War order.

The world ideological climate is now more contested as well. After being in retreat for decades, authoritarian regimes are increasingly pushing back against liberalizing currents, as the 2008 global financial crisis and its aftermath have raised questions about whether democracies can deliver the goods. Russia, China, and other authoritarian regimes have meanwhile reentered the global ideological competition in significant ways, touting the virtues of centralized control and “state capitalism,” and pushing back against Western concepts of political liberalism and human rights. Even countries that are part of the U.S.-led alliance system have regressed politically. Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán has proclaimed the rise of the “illiberal state” as an antidote to the weaknesses of liberal democracy, and his example has gained admirers in Poland, Slovakia, and elsewhere. As a result of all this, although democracy remains very robust by historical standards, the advance of electoral democracy has stalled over the past decade, and some contend that a “democratic recession” is under way.²² If history ever ended, it has restarted once more. In the realm of ideas, as in the realm of geopolitics, American primacy seems less daunting than before.

Finally, there are questions about the trajectory of America’s own engagement with the world. The United States has experienced significant real declines in defense spending since 2011, forcing difficult trade-offs among force structure, readiness, and modernization. Indeed, Washington is increasingly facing a crisis of strategic

solvency, as America's undiminished commitments outstrip its shrinking capabilities.²³ At the same time, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have encouraged pro-retrenchment sentiments at home; they have also raised doubts regarding America's judgment in starting wars and its ability to conclude those wars successfully. Overseas, U.S. partners in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia now appear concerned that America might undertake a broad-based withdrawal from key regions; for their part, Americans seem less convinced as to why the United States should retain such an assertive strategy when there is no obvious existential threat to national security to justify it. According to one poll conducted in 2013, 52 percent of Americans—the highest proportion in decades—believed that the country should now “mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own.”²⁴ Not least, there is the simple fact that a candidate who derided U.S. alliances and overseas commitments, who angrily denounced the pursuit of free trade and globalization, and who promised—on the stump, at least—major changes in American foreign policy was elected president in 2016. These factors have collectively fed into a narrative of national ennui and decline that is more pronounced than at any time since the 1970s.

Yet if this narrative is not baseless, it is overstated. For the idea that the era of American primacy has passed—that we are now entering or have already entered a truly multipolar world—is far from the truth. By virtually all key measures, the United States still has substantial, even massive, leads over its closest competitors. In 2016 the United States claimed a nearly US\$18.6 trillion GDP that was almost US\$7.5 trillion larger than China's, and it possessed a per capita GDP (a crucial measure of how much money a government can extract from its citizens to pursue geopolitical ends) roughly four times that of China. In the military realm, U.S. annual defense spending was still nearly three times that of China as of 2015—a

reminder that although China is closing the gap on Washington in certain respects, the overall gap remains significant indeed.²⁵

In fact, America's global lead is probably far bigger than indicated by simple numerical measures such as GDP and percentage of global military spending. GDP is a commonly used but problematic way of comparing U.S. and Chinese economic strength. It is merely a snapshot, rather than a fully explanatory measure of how wealth accrues over time; it does not account for factors such as the damage that China is doing to its own long-term economic potential through the devastation of its natural environment; it understates important U.S. advantages such as the fact that American citizens own significant minority shares in foreign corporations. By a more holistic measure of national economic strength—"inclusive wealth," which takes account of manufactured capital, human capital, and natural capital—the United States was still roughly 4.5 times wealthier than China as recently as 2010. Add in the enormous long-term economic problems that China faces—from declining growth rates, to a massive asset bubble, to a rapidly aging population—and forecasts of coming Chinese economic supremacy become more tenuous still.²⁶

The U.S. military lead is even more extensive. As a recent study by Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth concludes, although China's ongoing military buildup presents significant, even severe, *regional* challenges for the United States, at the *global* level there is still simply no comparison. The United States possesses massive advantages in high-end power-projection capabilities such as aircraft carriers, fourth- and fifth-generation tactical aircraft, nuclear-powered submarines, AWACS, and heavy unmanned aerial vehicles. These advantages have been amassed over decades, through enormous and accumulating investments, and so it will take decades—if not longer—for China to come close to matching the United States. These metrics, moreover, do not reflect the other, more intangible advantages that the U.S. military possesses—the

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years of recent experience in complex operations, the extraordinarily high levels of human capital, the flexible command-and-control structures that permit initiative and adaptation. “Rather than expecting a power transition in international politics,” Brooks and Wohlforth write, “everyone should start getting used to a world in which the United States remains the sole superpower for decades to come.”²⁷

Finally, any consideration of global power dynamics must evaluate the role of allies: the United States has dozens of them, whereas China and Russia have few, if any. (Those that they do have, countries such as Belarus and North Korea, make up a veritable international most-wanted list.) America’s allies give it geopolitical leverage, diplomatic influence, and military access that other countries can only envy; they add enormously to the overall weight of the Western coalition of which Washington remains leader. As of 2015, the United States and its core treaty allies in Asia and Europe accounted for roughly three-fifths of global wealth and global military spending—a share that was moderately diminished from twenty years earlier, but still very impressive by nearly all other historical comparisons.

There may come a time when U.S. primacy has vanished or diminished to the point of strategic insignificance, but that day is still a long way off. And so, rather than abandoning a grand strategy that has worked well over the past twenty-five years, America should instead work to sustain and reinvigorate that grand strategy for a period in which its primacy remains impressive, even if more contested than before.

KEEPING A GOOD THING GOING

Doing so requires embracing five principles that are vital to positioning the United States for continued grand strategic success. First, and most broadly, American officials and public observers

need to scope the grand strategy debate correctly. Every four years, a thunderstorm of proposals rain down for some “new grand strategy for America”—for a fundamentally revised approach to the world. With the rise of Donald Trump, that debate has suddenly become all the more urgent and real. Yet the United States does not need a fundamentally revised grand strategy; it already has one that has worked well over time and remains broadly consonant with global power realities today. The focus of the grand strategy debate, then, should be on adapting a generally successful approach at the margins, not coming up with something radically new from scratch.

Of course, change at the margins can still be consequential, and there is certainly room for fruitful debate on key policy questions. Advocates of an engaged and assertive globalism can profitably argue about when and how the United States should use force, how it should apportion resources among theaters, and how it should respond to specific issues, from Russian aggression in Ukraine to Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea. Heated debates on individual policy matters were part and parcel of a generally consistent grand strategy during the Cold War; there is no reason that America’s post-Cold War grand strategy cannot similarly accommodate such debates today. Moreover, it is natural to expect oscillations in the overall energy and ambition of U.S. statecraft. Dating back to World War II, such oscillations have generally helped preserve long-term balance in American strategy and enabled U.S. statecraft to periodically revert to a broadly effective mean. Successful grand strategy always entails debate, learning, and adaptation within a larger framework of continuity. Understanding this point is central to orienting the grand strategy debate today.

Second, and more specifically, the United States will need to shore up the military foundation of its grand strategy by reinvesting in defense. Military power is hardly the only tool of U.S. policy, but military dominance has been a fundamental enabler of the

global influence and stability that America has enjoyed over the past twenty-five years. And for all of America's globalist ambitions, maintaining that military dominance has been easily affordable during the post-Cold War era. At the peak of the superpower contest in the 1950s, U.S. military spending regularly consumed 10 to 12 percent of GDP; since the mid-1990s, the number has usually been between 3 and 4 percent. In a relatively benign environment, Washington has had its primacy on the cheap.²⁸

Today, however (as discussed in greater detail in chapter 6), America is rapidly reaching the limits of this approach. At present, the demands on U.S. defense dollars are becoming greater than at any time in the post-Cold War era, and Washington faces major upcoming investments needed to modernize its nuclear deterrent and perpetuate its conventional edge. Yet American defense dollars are simultaneously becoming scarcer, as post-2011 budget cuts take the defense budget down toward 3 percent of GDP and even lower.²⁹ These trends are unsustainable—sooner or later (and probably sooner), growing demands and decreasing resources will erode the military foundation of American grand strategy, undercut the credibility of U.S. commitments, and thereby jeopardize the stability and influence that U.S. strategy has provided. “Strategy,” Bernard Brodie famously wrote, “wears a dollar sign,” and Washington will get only what it pays for in global affairs.³⁰

This does not mean reverting to Cold War-era levels of defense spending or anything like them. What it does mean is removing the Budget Control Act spending caps that have driven defense expenditures downward over the past several years and replacing them with an agreement that controls spiraling entitlement costs and provides for steady, long-term growth in defense spending. Put another way, the United States can surely preserve an acceptable level of military primacy if it is willing to spend in the neighborhood of 4 percent of GDP on defense, and to focus that spending on investments such as the A2/AD-busting capabilities needed to preserve

U.S. deterrence and power projection in increasingly contested regions. It probably cannot do so at 3 percent of GDP or below.³¹

Third, and related, the United States needs to firm up the coalition aspect of its grand strategy by getting more out of—and diversifying—its relationships with allies and partners. America’s post-Cold War primacy has always rested on its leadership of a community of capable, like-minded nations, and U.S. allies and partners have been crucial contributors on issues from upholding regional stability to encouraging democracy and markets overseas. In the coming years, moreover, shoring up U.S. alliances against the Russian and Chinese challenges will constitute a fundamental endeavor of American statecraft. Yet, as noted previously, the share of global wealth and power held by America’s core treaty allies has fallen over the past two decades. U.S. primacy remains intact, but the overall relative strength of the U.S.-led coalition is slipping.

There are two principal pathways to addressing this core grand strategic challenge. One is by getting more out of existing U.S. allies, by pushing them to embrace policies that will stretch their resources further. Encouraging greater defense specialization and sharing of resources within NATO, pushing Asian and eastern European allies to adopt more cost-effective defense strategies based on A2/AD capabilities, and fostering greater multilateral ties among allies (particularly in Asia) all represent ways of getting more allied bang for the buck. Likewise, as Washington increases its own commitments to the European and Asia-Pacific theaters—as it is already starting to do—it should make clear that additional U.S. activity is also contingent on U.S. allies upping their security game.

Equally important, the United States should offset the relative decline of some traditional allies by deepening newer partnerships. Global power is not just shifting to America’s rivals—it is also shifting to an array of states that are formally nonaligned but are nonetheless increasingly willing to work with Washington and its allies

on a range of critical international issues. India, Brazil, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the United Arab Emirates, to take some key examples, have all forged deeper ties with the United States over the past decade or so on issues ranging from counterterrorism to maritime issues to regional security in the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region. By improving flexible partnerships with such states, the United States can position itself to more effectively address emerging geopolitical challenges and opportunities, and to sustain a global *imbalance* of power in support of key aspects of the international order.

Fourth, even as the United States focuses on shoring up the partnerships and power that make its grand strategy possible, it must also show discipline in employing that power. U.S. strategy has arguably been most successful when it has focused on the core tasks of preserving the basic stability and well-being of the international system and creating broad conditions in which political and economic liberalism can advance. These are the tasks for which American power is best suited, and in view of the return of great-power competition and other key threats, they are likely to pose the most crucial challenges in the years to come. Conversely, the United States has gotten into trouble when its immense power has encouraged strategic indiscipline—overestimating America’s ability to rapidly transform foreign societies, or overreaching in the use of force. Such indiscipline is invariably punished through unforeseen and unwelcome geopolitical consequences abroad, and through the undermining of public support for robust American internationalism at home. This was the case with Vietnam during the Cold War; it has certainly been the case with Iraq more recently. And at a time when the U.S. margin of superiority has eroded from its post-Cold War peak, strategic profligacy is a luxury that Washington cannot afford.

To be clear, maintaining strategic discipline does not mean fore-swearing all uses of force or assuming that all military interventions

will lead inexorably to massive, multiyear commitments. Nor does it mean forsaking the active promotion of democracy and human rights. There will still be times when limited, coercive uses of force are appropriate to protect U.S. interests in key regions. There are cases today in which threats to the international order can be met only by force—think of the Islamic State, for example. U.S. alliance commitments must ultimately be backed by force when necessary. And finally, the nonmilitary aspects of democracy promotion—from economic assistance to emerging democracies to the activities of institutions such as the National Endowment for Democracy—will have a key role to play in the more competitive ideological environment that is now emerging.

But being disciplined does require a basic sense of limits and humility. It requires recognizing the limitations of military force as a tool of political transformation in historically illiberal societies. It requires accepting that there are problems and injustices that not even a superpower can solve, and that wisdom lies in discerning where American interests are most implicated and where American power can make a critical difference. Above all, it requires realizing that overextension can be just as dangerous as underinvestment when it comes to sustaining America's post-Cold War statecraft. Great power must be rationed as well as used if it is to be effective and enduring; acknowledging this point represents a fourth principle for U.S. strategy.

Fifth and finally, sustaining America's post-Cold War strategy entails persuading the American public to recommit to that strategy and the investments it requires. The state of American opinion on that subject is currently ambiguous. Polling data indicates that public support for most key aspects of American internationalism has recovered somewhat from where it was in 2012–13, and is again at or near postwar averages.³² But the 2016 election cycle and its eventual outcome revealed strong support for candidates who advocated rolling back key elements of post-Cold War (and

post-World War II) grand strategy, from free trade to U.S. alliances. This atmosphere reflects discontent with the failures and frustrations of U.S. grand strategy in the post-Cold War era, no doubt, yet it also reflects the fact that American strategy seems at risk of becoming a victim of its own success.³³ By helping to foster a comparatively stable and congenial environment, American policies have made it more difficult for Americans to remember why significant investments in the global order are needed in the first place.

Today, this ambivalence is becoming increasingly problematic, for the simple reason that properly resourcing American strategy requires making politically difficult trade-offs with respect to entitlements and other ballooning domestic costs. It is also becoming problematic, of course, because even if the American public seems to support particular aspects of American grand strategy, the public has shown itself willing to elect a president who appears to care little for the successful postwar and post-Cold War tradition, even if he has, so far, maintained more aspects of that tradition as president than his campaign rhetoric might have led one to expect. In the future—and indeed, looking beyond Trump’s presidency—sustaining American grand strategy will thus require more intensive political efforts.

American leaders will need to more effectively make the case for controversial but broadly beneficial policies such as free trade, while also addressing the inevitable socioeconomic dislocations such policies cause.³⁴ They will need to more fully articulate the underlying logic and value of alliances and other commitments whose costs are often more visible—not to say greater—than their benefits. They will need to remind Americans that their country’s leadership has not been a matter of charity; it has helped produce an international order that is exceptional in its stability, liberalism, and benefits for the United States. Not least, they will need to make the case that the costs that the country has borne in support of that order are designed to avoid the necessity of bearing vastly higher costs if the

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international scene returned to a more tumultuous state. After all, the success of American statecraft is often reflected in the bad things that don't happen as well as in the good things that do. Making this point is essential to reconsolidating domestic support now and in the future—and to preserving a grand strategy that has delivered pretty good results for a quarter century.