(Re)Discovering the National Interest: The Future of U.S. Foreign Policy and Defense Strategy

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Abstract: *There is an enduring consensus about America's role in the world, which is due to the fact that while administrations may change, fundamental U.S. interests have not. These include protecting the U.S. homeland from catastrophic attack, sustaining a global system marked by open lines of communication to facilitate commerce, and preserving regional balances of power. Far from being a reluctant imperialist or hegemon on the offensive, the United States tends to fill security voids when they are created (even if often late to the game) to ensure the international system remains functional. To be sure, future U.S. grand strategy will be global and multilateral, but it will be much more selective than it is today.*

Foreign policy consists in bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation's commitments and the nation's power.[1]—Walter Lippman

Since 1945, the United States has employed military force about every four years. Some deployments were high-intensity conflicts, like Korea in 1950-1953 or Iraq in 1990-1991. Other deployments were long-term efforts to counter insurgencies and build functioning states, such as Vietnam from 1959- 1975 and Afghanistan since 2001. While the United States has been an interventionist power, it has not acted according to traditional notions of national interests to fight wars defending the homeland or seizing territory—like past Asian and European powers. Rather, every modern U.S. military intervention was driven by a particular

[1] Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1943).

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internationalist narrative such as containment, the global war on terrorism, or the responsibility to protect.

As U.S. foreign policy looks beyond 2016 and the presidential campaign, the country remains focused on international terrorism and whether another major attack on the U.S. homeland might occur; seeks to support regimes throughout the world in confronting their internal security challenges so that direct U.S. intervention will not be required; and now increasingly is worried about regional powers expanding their borders or spheres of influence through the force of arms, providing the first real major challenges to the stability of the post-Cold War order. Nevertheless, with likely reductions in defense spending, and a general distaste from recent bouts of state-building efforts, the United States will be more selective about where it chooses to use force. As a result, the U.S. preference will be to reinforce capable partners such as India, Japan, Australia, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom and France, who can take on stabilizing roles in their regions to deter the possible rise of challengers intent upon changing the existing global order. These partners, who can make definitive contributions to international security, have a shared sense of a world defined by secure lines of communication, free trade and collective security. Certainly, future U.S. grand strategy will be global and multilateral, but it will be much more selective than it is today.

Factors Shaping U.S. Grand Strategy

Michael Roskin sees contemporary generational shifts in the prevailing foreign policy paradigm between active engagement or retrenchment.

> Each elite American generation comes to favor one of these orientations by living through the catastrophe brought on by the application *ad absurdum* of the opposite paradigm at the hands of the previous elite generation. Thus the bearers of the "Pearl Harbor paradigm" (themselves reacting to the deficiencies of the interwar "isolationism"), eventually drove interventionism into the ground in Vietnam, giving rise to a noninterventionist "Vietnam paradigm."[2]

As this generation comes to terms with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we expect a similar paradigm to take hold, reinforced by other key factors that will drive future U.S. grand strategy.

First, fiscal austerity is a reality in the United States that will affect the expeditionary capabilities and global American military presence. It is already rare to find the U.S. Navy steaming in the Atlantic. While shrinking budgets affect strategy, so, too, a sclerotic national security bureaucracy will struggle to reform as it seeks to protect its fleeting resource base. In spite of calls to improve the interagency or create an expeditionary civilian force, national security reforms are stunted. *Second*, the failure of grand plans to reshape the Middle East and Central Asia has instilled

[2] Michael Roskin, "From Pearl Harbor to Vietnam: Shifting Generational Paradigms and Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly,* Fall 1974, p. 563.