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Recasting US Foreign Policy

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## **Executive Summary**

**Title:** Recasting US Foreign Policy

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**Thesis:** Over the next two years the administration should refine its statement of US foreign policy by redefining US interests along more narrow lines in order to reduce the perceived need for US military interventions abroad.

**Discussion:** This paper will examine our interests as currently stated, define a refined policy in contrast to our recent past, and then use that refined policy to assess situations in the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has struggled to define its interests and provide a clear statement of its foreign policy. While there is a fairly stable and rewarding consensus on the role of trade, the balance between diplomacy and military force has been problematic. The US defines its interests in its central strategy document, but the current definitions are impractically vague to the point of justifying nearly any action abroad.

**Conclusion:** Our leaders must redefine these interests with narrower more practical limits. The US must also take greater care in the pursuit of these interests by military means, as its resources alone are insufficient to contend with the large number of challenges to global stability.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has struggled to define its interests and provide a clear statement of its foreign policy. While there is a fairly stable and rewarding consensus on the role of trade, the balance between diplomacy and military force has been problematic. The result has been a series of draining and often unpredictable interventions abroad, culminating in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The US defines its interests in its central strategy document, but the current definitions are impractically vague to the point of justifying nearly any action abroad.

Our leaders must redefine these interests with narrower more practical limits. The US must also take greater care in the pursuit of those interests by military means, as its resources alone are insufficient to contend with the large number of challenges to global stability. Although there has been no explicit statement, in the second term of the Obama administration the US has begun conducting its foreign policy in this manner, as an increased emphasis on diplomacy and relatively restrained US military actions in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia have demonstrated. This paper will examine our interests as currently stated, define a refined policy in contrast to our recent past, and then use that refined policy to assess situations in the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Over the next two years the administration should complete its refinement of US foreign policy along the lines defined here in order to build domestic consensus in support of it and ensure this policy carries over into the future.

## **DEFINING US POLICY AND INTERESTS**

The US government does not define its foreign policy in a single clearly identified document. The document that most nearly establishes US foreign policy is the National Security Strategy (NSS), a report from the President that Congress nominally required annually as an accompaniment to the budget.<sup>1</sup> Although the NSS should not be so detailed that it leaves no decision space for leaders, the bureaucratic drafting process leaves it so vague it is essentially useless in providing guidance. One recent US Secretary of Defense confessed to not reading it prior to his confirmation.<sup>2</sup> The 2010 National Security Strategy defines four enduring national interests: security, prosperity, values, and the international order.<sup>3</sup> Although each administration has restated a list of national interests in their own words, these four focus points have been generally consistent since the end of the Cold War.

The most recent National Security Strategy defines these four enduring interests only broadly before detailing how they apply to specific problems confronting the US in 2010. Security has an obvious application to the United States and its allies. The NSS takes a more ambiguous scope by including US partners, which is an extremely broad group encompassing nearly every nation in the world in some way. The NSS also defines the other three interests on a global scale, with calls for an open international economic system, recognition and respect of universal values as defined by the US, and most obviously with the end state of an international order advanced by US leadership.

It does not prioritize between these four enduring interests, noting they are interdependent. There is a specific assumption that positive results in the pursuit of one interest will create positive results in the pursuit of others.<sup>4</sup> This construct eliminates the

need to prioritize amongst the four, neglecting the fact that there are apparent conflicts even within the individual interests. Ambiguity at this level is not necessarily a bad thing. Overly prescriptive or rigid statements restrict US decision makers as circumstances change and enable other nations to maximize their own opportunities, sometimes at US expense. Unfortunately this ambiguity often appears as inconsistency to our allies and partners as they perceive US priorities shifting between and within presidential administrations. This perception hinders the development of the very international order that the NSS defines as an enduring interest of our national security.

The assumption that the rest of the world supports the global vision of the US is a major cause of our foreign policy shortcomings. When the US observes a problem in the world, especially in certain regions, it has a bias for action whether or not there is a strong tie between the situation and enduring US interests. In many cases the initial US response runs contrary to the interests, desires, or capabilities of countries more directly involved. This is especially problematic when the other countries are either allies who agree with the US on many other issues, or partners who have narrower but still valuable overlaps with other US interests. US action absent their support or with their opposition increases friction with the US, may exacerbate the problem at hand, and make responses to other shared problems more difficult. The end result of this bias for action is often a weakening of the US position in the world.

The solution to this problem is first to narrow the definition of US interests. Although the ideal world our current statement of interests envisions would be a better place it is not a realistic near-term goal. The amount of effort and speed with which the US should invest in averting or mitigating a potential foreign crisis must be directly

connected to the potential impacts of the crisis on US national security. Even though it is the wealthiest nation in the world by many measures, the US alone does not have sufficient resources and capabilities to resolve every situation it sees as negative. The US government must become more ruthless in apportioning its resources to conserve them for the more dangerous challenges.

### **RESTATING US INTERESTS**

The four enduring interests in the most recent National Security Strategy are fundamentally sound starting points for these more focused interests, starting with the security of the United States. The physical security of that finite territory and the citizens that reside within it – the 50 states of the homeland plus a few islands with associated statuses, should be the foundation of US foreign policy. The current goal of extending that security to citizens overseas is also dangerously broad, creating the interpretation the US values its citizens over the sovereignty of other nations. As with other countries, the US should attempt to protect the legal rights of its citizens abroad and be prepared to assist them in the event of major emergencies but it should cease to make such explicit statements about their security.<sup>5</sup>

The second portion of the current US statement on its enduring security interest needs greater adjustment. Given the deliberately vague and expansive definition of US partners, the current statement essentially states the US has a direct interest in the security of essentially every other country in the world. This unrealistic formulation provides no clarity for foreign policy makers. The security of partner nations is relevant only as far as threats to them also directly threaten US interests. Partners that seek a greater

commitment from the US should pursue a mutually beneficial treaty. More remote threats to US interests should merit less investment in response. The security of treaty allies does merit greater attention as required by the treaty text. Any treaty alliance that has exhausted its original purpose must be recast to ensure it remains meaningful to the US. The reduced rhetorical references to protecting partners and critical assessment of alliances should reduce the number of crisis where the US feels a need to respond with major commitments and may drive in increase in investment from other stakeholders in the international system.

The physical security of the United States is the foundation of US foreign policy but the US economy is the practical heart of US strength. As a priority for US foreign policy it should follow only defense of the homeland. Past habit and nostalgia should not drive economic interests, only present realities and future prospects. US leaders must deliberately tie those future prospects to the security costs involved. While the US economy benefitted greatly from access to Middle Eastern oil, the US also expended massive resources in attempts to secure that oil. After decades of rhetoric the US has nearly eliminated its direct dependence on this source, though with 1/3 of the world's oil coming from the Middle East there is still a significant impact through global oil prices.<sup>6</sup> Despite that, the shift away from direct dependence should generate a reassessment of overall US policy towards the region. This reassessment may help narrow the scope of US security commitments in general while freeing resources for use in other regions of greater import to the future economic health of the US.

The third enduring US national interest, values, has both moral and practical worth. The moral worth is apparent in the world's enshrinement of similar values in the

United Nations Charter and other international documents, signed by nearly every government in the world. There is widespread agreement that the world would be a better place if governments ensured their populations had certain fundamental rights. The difficulty is that no document specifically defines most of those values, making the adjective “universal” used to describe values in the National Security Strategy aspirational at best.

The US has an image of itself as a beacon of values for the world to follow, starting with the city on the hill of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, extending through Wilsonian idealism, and continuing today. Unfortunately even as the US has tried to spread these values its actions have often undermined this image, again starting in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the violent displacement of indigenous populations. During the Cold War the US had difficulty holding the moral high ground in condemning Soviet repression of their own population while the Civil Rights struggle faced violent resistance in the US.<sup>7</sup> Edward Snowden’s revelations about US surveillance activities undermined confidence in the US respect for individual rights and freedoms.<sup>8</sup> Most recently the US Senate has reported on government sanctioned human rights abuses that US intelligence personnel committed during counter-terror operations, reducing the moral strength of annual reports the US releases on human rights abuses in other countries. This events have given the world more than sufficient reason to wonder if the US’s proclaimed support for universal values is simple hypocrisy.

The 2014 US Senate torture report did provide a demonstration of self-reflection and transparency that populations overseas do still admire.<sup>9</sup> This should serve as one starting point for a values based campaign that could have great practical benefits in

advancing US interests. Most of the countries that currently or potentially pose foreign policy challenges to the United States, including but not limited to China, Iran, and Russia, rely on a large degree of information control to sustain control by their nominally democratic regimes. Those types of government are seriously concerned about the spread of certain values, in this case mainly freedom of expression for individuals and the press. There are many in the Russian government who retrospectively see the Helsinki Accords of the 1970s as a deliberate US plot to undermine communist governments by encouraging their populations to focus on individual rights.<sup>10</sup> There are several states increasing restrictions on foreign funding for non-governmental organizations focused on human rights development, which these governments see as a threat to their control.<sup>11</sup> Today Russia and China are signatories of a treaty pledging cooperation against what they call information warfare, which includes the spread of ideas and in many cases facts that could undermine their stability.<sup>12</sup>

The obvious fear US rivals hold of the values espoused by the current National Security Strategy illustrates the importance of those values to US foreign policy. While military force guards the US against immediate threats and its economic strength seems likely to help the US maintain its position in the next decade, the evolution of current rivals into like-minded states with respect for similar values is the best guarantor of long term US security. The most important component of this technique is ensuring that the US respects these values domestically to provide legitimacy for its evangelizing efforts abroad. Given the size of the US government and its decentralized structure, there will continue to be violations of these principles. In those cases the US must be transparent and take corrective action, as improving information sharing technologies make hiding

flaws increasingly difficult. The US must readily admit its own shortcomings to reduce the weight of inevitable hypocrisy charges. At the same time, the US must maintain its overt information programs, ranging from annual reports on human rights, religious freedom, and other topics while continuing to ensure the Voice of America and other services provide unvarnished views. Although it is tempting to use such platforms to show the US as it sees itself rather than as it is, that behavior risks undermining the very values the US seeks to disseminate.

In addition to guarding its own behavior, the US must continuously assess the actions of the governments it partners with abroad. As President Jimmy Carter learned, there are cases where the principles of human rights are rightfully subordinate to other factors in international relations. Each of those exceptions does risk the creation of a long term challenge for the US in lost credibility with future generations, as demonstrated by US relations with Iran since 1979. The same problems can occur even if those regimes do transition to some form of liberal democracy, as past alienation of even a minority of voters can complicate an elected government's efforts to cooperate with the US. In order to meet long term security goals, the US must reduce its reliance on partners of dubious repute today while continuing to engage with them to influence improvements for the future.

Although this renewed emphasis on shared values and long term stability will decrease the attractiveness of the US as a partner to some, other shifts in US action may help compensate for those difficulties. The US amplifies its resources and international legitimacy through cooperation with other states and should continue to do so with improvements in two areas. First, in cases where another friendly state has larger

interests at stake than the US, that state must be willing to take positive action beyond just enabling the US. Put simply, if the country or countries most directly affected by a problem are unwilling to act, the US should not attempt to act on their behalf. Secondly, policy makers and would-be policy makers in the US must recognize that the US cannot and should not always control or influence the decisions of other governments. There may be cases where the US has a burning desire to act in a situation but cannot convince those directly involved to do so. Absent major direct threats to US interests in those situations, the US should not act alone. By granting its partners a greater say in combined responses to issues and reducing its direct involvement in international problems, the US may reduce some of the negative popular perceptions held towards it.

Negative perceptions of the US drive many of the perceived threats to its national security today and many US responses only exacerbate these views. The most immediate threat continues to be acts of terrorism, with extremist Islamic ideology the driving force. The US is deeply unpopular in the Middle East, with favorability ratings below 20% even in partners and allies including Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, and Turkey.<sup>13</sup> Though one cause of this sentiment is frustration with the inability of many Muslim majority states to develop, the United States is an easy target for a long history of actions seen as hostile to Muslims and interference in the region dating back decades.<sup>14</sup> The September 11<sup>th</sup> attackers cited US policy in the Middle East as one of their primary motivations.<sup>15</sup> While the US seeks to build “positive partnerships”<sup>16</sup> with Muslim countries and has spoken about the need to undermine ideological support for terrorist groups, many of its actions since 2001 have produced the opposite effect.<sup>17</sup> While current US policies have had short term success in preventing another major attack on the US, they have not made positive

contributions to the multi-generation effort to eliminate the anti-US sentiment that fuels support for terrorist groups.<sup>18</sup>

Anti-US attitudes are not as prevalent in other regions but based on past events they may still complicate US foreign policy in the future. Though most of Japan supports the US alliance, the majority of Okinawa's population does not. This has complicated US basing plans and relations with the central government.<sup>19</sup> In nearby South Korea, former President Roh Moo-hyun won office with clear anti-American sentiments, likely based on his imprisonment and near execution under a US backed dictatorship.<sup>20</sup> Moving south to another treaty ally, recent negotiations over US access to military facilities in the Philippines took years to resolve due to a constitutional ban on foreign military bases in the country passed after decades of US support for the Marcos dictatorship.<sup>21</sup> In South America, US manufacturer Boeing may have lost a lucrative contract in Brazil in part due to revelations the US had been monitoring Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff's communications.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the same leaked information on alleged US espionage has damaged US relations with Germany while that country is at the center of Europe's response to many problems, including the EU financial crisis, Russian aggression in the Ukraine, and the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.<sup>23</sup> All of these examples represent complications to US foreign policy, and though none were catastrophic they illustrate the value of the current US President's foreign policy stance, reported as "don't do stupid shit."<sup>24</sup> They all point towards a less interventionist US foreign policy that reduces the probability that a response to a problem today may create larger difficulties to more important interests in the future.

## **LESSONS FROM HISTORY**

The US did have a more conservative foreign policy in terms of military intervention early in the Cold War. At the time the Soviet Union presented a clearly defined threat to the US. It possessed the conventional military capability and was developing the nuclear capability to devastate the US and its allies in Europe. In response to this threat, under President Harry Truman the US debated and then implemented the policy of containment, focused on preventing Soviet expansion into vital areas while waiting for their government to collapse from its own failings.<sup>25</sup> When President Dwight Eisenhower took office, he directed a detailed review of his predecessor's policy before essentially choosing to continue it despite Republican campaign pledges to the contrary.<sup>26</sup>

President Eisenhower's review and subsequent policy included two points worth highlighting. First, each alternative produced by his review had a clear economic component, including the costs of the proposed alternative.<sup>27</sup> The second point is related – Eisenhower's ultimate policy selection was essentially the lowest cost option made with the realization it would limit his administration's ability to intervene in some cases of Soviet or Communist aggression. He accepted that situation as he intended to avoid US entry into further limited wars such as the "police action" in Korea. During the 1950s the US would rely on the principle of massive retaliation with nuclear weapons to deter any major enemy actions while relying heavily on non-military means in pursuit of less vital interests.<sup>28</sup> Although even his senior military leaders criticized this strategy<sup>29</sup> it enabled him to maintain a lower level of defense spending and focus on domestic economic priorities during his two terms in office<sup>30</sup> while maintaining nuclear superiority over the

Soviet Union<sup>31</sup> and meeting his foreign policy objectives. His non-military interventions did cause some long term policy challenges, notably in Cuba and Iran, but they avoided expensive major conflicts.

Presidents after Eisenhower did not maintain this limited policy. President Eisenhower had rejected intervention in Vietnam in the belief that the moral high ground of being an anti-colonial power was worth more than Vietnam.<sup>32</sup> President John Kennedy did intervene, ultimately reducing the credibility of the US government at home and abroad, damaging the US economy with its cost, and effectively breaking the US Army.<sup>33</sup> Kennedy with his mantra of bear any burden and his successors followed a policy with much greater emphasis on armed intervention abroad, following Vietnam with smaller efforts in Latin America during the 1980s. This outlasted the Cold War, spanning Bosnia, Haiti, Iraq, Kosovo, Liberia, Panama, and Somalia during the 1990s, and endured into the Global War on Terror. Since the end of the contest with the nuclear-armed Soviets, public opinion has become that largest check on US involvement abroad and as President Bush demonstrated with his “surge” in Iraq in 2006 even this is not always a real impediment.<sup>34</sup> One critic of the enduring interventionist mindset, Dr. Andrew Bacevich, described it as the belief that the US is responsible for enforcing the norms that underlie the international order. The US has had both successes and failures in that campaign, but believed that its good faith efforts justified both the expenditure of resources and the occasional unfortunate outcome.<sup>35</sup>

Even if this belief and the policies that stem from it were the best policy during the Cold War, they are no longer appropriate nor even possible for the US today. In the Cold War the US was mainly struggled against one rival. The Soviets massive nuclear

arsenal and poor economic performance limited the number and extent of potential conflicts.<sup>36</sup> Today the US faces a host of would-be rivals and potential foreign dilemmas, each of which has some interest group pressing for intervention. Even with the US economy the world's largest in absolute terms, supporting US defense spending that matches the next 9 largest reported defense budgets in the world combined<sup>37</sup> (5 of whom are US treaty allies and a 6<sup>th</sup> a close US partner) plus additional spending on diplomacy and development, the US lacks the ability to contend with more than a small fraction of the world's problems. In some cases outside interventions may be incapable of resolving the conflict regardless of the resources committed.<sup>38</sup>

#### FOREIGN POLICY RECAST

Rather than continue to expend money, lives, and credibility in an effort to singlehandedly maintain the global order, the US should pursue a less ambitious and potentially more effective approach based on the re-defined national interests described above. The US should refocus its foreign policy to concentrate its resources on defense of the United States proper and secondly those allies who provide significant security or economic benefits to the United States. Policy makers must factor economic consequences, both in terms of dollar cost and effect on US economic growth, in all foreign policy decisions in keeping with its prioritization as second only to the physical security of the US. Finally, given the long-term power of values and the moral high ground in shaping the world into a more desirable place for the US, decision makers must place greater emphasis on ensuring the US represents, respects, and propagates the ideals enshrined in our founding documents and self-image.

This adjustment in the particulars of US interests and subsequent policy shifts will not end US involvement and interventions abroad nor will it repudiate all past US foreign policy. Retrospectively it does call into question some past US actions, particularly those in response to the terrorist attacks of 2001. Though this policy would have produced dramatically different actions 13 years ago in Iraq and later Afghanistan, the differences in response to today's situation in the Middle East would be less drastic. Finally, the engagement of the US in Southeast Asia over the past several years comes close to representing the ideal outcome of this policy even if some of the driving interests remain more second hand than direct.

#### THE CASE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

There are two interests that have driven US involvement in the Middle East since the start of the Cold War – Israel<sup>39</sup> and oil. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries oil embargo starting in 1973 made the importance of Middle Eastern oil to the US economy painfully obvious. It, combined with the US expulsion from former ally Iran, also marked the beginning of elevated levels of direct US military involvement in the region. Given the lack of alternate energy supplies,<sup>40</sup> elements of US foreign policy in the 1980s including direct military action to protect shipping lanes, were logical. Even the massive US military response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was a relatively proportionate response and well executed with meaningful contributions from nearly every neighboring country<sup>41</sup> and other countries around the world including massive financial contributions that funded much of the war.<sup>42</sup> The dual containment of Iran and Iraq in the 1990s, with regular low-level military action against Iraq, was less directly

supportive of US interests. Although Iraq and Iran opposed the interests of the US and its oil producing partners in the Persian Gulf, neither was in position to overmatch their neighbors as Iraq had done with Kuwait.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq does not satisfy any of the redefined US interests. Contrary to popular belief, Iraq was not involved in the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the United States and did not pose an immediate threat to US security.<sup>43</sup> Even if Saddam Hussein had actually been actively developing new weapons of mass destruction (WMD,) at the time the US also believed that hostile regimes in Iran, Libya, North Korea, and Syria were doing the same. There was little cause to single Iraq out from that group. Although the US was still dependent on Middle Eastern oil at the time, Saddam Hussein's government does not seem to have posed a significant threat to those supplies or the US economy. Finally, there was also no moral distinction. Iraq was no more undemocratic than the collection of monarchies with which the US routinely partnered. The world had no reason to believe the US condoned the immoral behavior of Saddam Hussein towards his own people, which again was not significantly worse than that of some of the other states developing WMD. Based on this standard, Iraq was at best a minor irritant to US interests, not worth the \$1-3 trillion spent and thousands of lives lost in the US attempt to resolve the problem.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to the high dollar cost of the Iraq War as of December 2014 the outcome has not been notably better for the limited US interests at stake. Ironically, the US is involved in an air campaign over Iraq and Syria currently more intense than the decade long air campaign to contain Saddam Hussein. The US has incurred the additional burden of providing military aid to the struggling Iraqi government and Syrian

resistance groups including uniformed military trainers operating in close proximity to fighting.<sup>45</sup> Although there are numerous political considerations driving this US intervention, it only weakly meets the requirements of this revised foreign policy statement. The direct security threat to the US is questionable, as either the need to govern conquered territory or the challenges of operating in ungoverned spaces are likely to limit the capacity of the Islamic State organization (ISIL) to conduct overseas attacks.<sup>46</sup> Despite rhetoric to the contrary few terrorist attacks on the US since 2001 have had direct ties to locations abroad.<sup>47</sup> The US has nearly eliminated its dependence on Middle Eastern oil exports but several of its closest trading partners continue to rely on them and they are a substantial factor in global oil prices, creating an indirect but significant economic interest. The strongest value based argument in favor of intervention is that the US played a major role in establishing the conditions for ISIL's success so far and therefore has some moral obligation to help contain the problem.

The combination of the indirect economic interest and values argument may justify direct US intervention against ISIL, but not to the degree of commitment seen in either Iraq or Afghanistan since 2001. There are multiple states in the region with much greater interests, and it is appropriate and encouraging that they are participating in and having significant influence on US actions and goals.<sup>48</sup> ISIL has seized territory in Iraq and Syria and is in open conflict with groups competing for power in those countries. Iran is concerned about the loss of its hard earned influence in Iraq and Syria. The ISIL ideology poses a security threat to the region's monarchies, including the Gulf States and Jordan. Lebanon and Turkey share even more direct threats of cross border violence plus

the economic burden of the large number of refugees moving into their territories. All of these states have a much greater stake in the outcome of this war than the US.

The US has rightly chosen to partner with all these states except Syria (indirectly in the case of Iran) and other interested parties in Europe. The US appears to accept that the contributions of this ad-hoc coalition are worth accepting the lowest common denominator in the outcome, specifically the ambiguity regarding the continued existence of the Assad regime.<sup>49</sup> The US has also limited the scope of its intervention, with President Barack Obama specifically ruling out direct ground combat operations.<sup>50</sup> The moral commitment of the US to support the nascent government of Iraq is fading as it is already clear much of the ISIL problem stems from the actions of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.<sup>51</sup> There are no other significant, direct security threats to the United States in the Middle East.<sup>52</sup> Given the declining direct relationship between the US economy and Middle Eastern oil exports, even this limited engagement should mark the end of US military intervention in the region for the foreseeable future. The four Asian countries that combined to receive 60% of Saudi Arabia's oil exports in 2013 (China, India, Japan, and South Korea) may consider playing a larger role in Gulf security in the future to safeguard their own economies.<sup>53</sup>

The presence of Osama Bin Laden's terrorist network in Afghanistan in 2001 was a threat to the physical security of the US, as demonstrated on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Al-Qaeda's successful attack killed 3,000 people. The attack and aftermath also caused measurable economic damage to the US.<sup>54</sup> If the assumption that Bin Laden was capable of executing another attack was valid, that alone justified US action against his group in proportion to the potential amount of damage. US support for the overthrow of the

Taliban, a combination of covert and unconventional forces, was likely the most efficient way to reduce Al-Qaeda presence in the country. Apart from disrupting Al-Qaeda's base in Afghanistan, US interests at the time did not justify deeper involvement in Afghanistan. The same security threat from weak central governments providing space for terrorist groups also existed in many other places in the world, making it difficult to justify a major investment in Afghanistan alone. Instability in Afghanistan remains a factor in the dangerous security dynamic in South Asia but the acts of various terrorist groups based in Pakistan are potentially much more destabilizing. US economic engagement with Afghanistan was and continues to be minimal. Based on US support for parties in other civil wars and coups those actions did not create the moral obligation to ensure the new government was a long term success. Finally, the values espoused by the US are so far removed from the social practices of most Afghans that assistance based on that rationale is spurious if not delusional. The determination by the Bush administration, NATO, and later the Obama administration that Afghanistan presented such a large threat as to require massive conventional intervention was not in the long term interests of any of the parties involved.

## THE CASE IN ASIA

The US does not have a major peer competitor today and has had no reason to use force to forestall the rapid development of the People's Republic of China. China may become a peer competitor capable of directly threatening all US vital interests – security, economic, and values - in the coming decades. Today China is in more direct competition with its neighbors than the US, and the US response to that competition

particularly in Southeast Asia is another good illustration of how this more restrained policy may safeguard US interests without excessive investments or military conflict. China's relations with the US and its neighbors are tumultuous today, but remain short of military conflict thanks in part to judicious US actions.

The US has a long history of involvement with the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and not all of it has been positive. The Philippines has a mutual defense treaty with the US, but also has a strong under-current of anti-US sentiment stemming from decades of US colonial rule, frequent US interference in domestic politics, and US support for the Marcos dictatorship.<sup>55</sup> This US ally has a constitutional prohibition of the presence of foreign military bases, a direct reaction to past US behavior. Moving south, US actions caused significant harm in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Indonesia remembers US support for separatist movements in the 1950s, rumors of US involvement in bloody anti-communist purges in the 1960s, and more recently the withdrawal of US military assistance that did major damage to the Indonesian military at the end of the Cold War.<sup>56</sup> In the 1990s Malaysia was renowned for Prime Minister Mahathir's emphasis on "Asian Values" as a contrast to the US, and his rejection of western advice during the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis.<sup>57</sup> Thailand is a US treaty ally as a vestige of the 1950s Southeast Asia Treaty Organization but its frequent military coups have been problematic for the US.<sup>58</sup> The US considered Myanmar a pariah for decades. Singapore and Brunei, two of the smallest countries, have had only minimal friction with the US by comparison but in total history has left the nations of Southeast Asia not always inclined to welcome US involvement.<sup>59</sup>

The US does not have direct security interests in Southeast Asia. It does have a mutual defense treaty with the Philippines and a more nuanced mutual defense treaty with Thailand. It has a greater direct economic interest, with just over 5% of both US imports and exports involving the countries of the region. It has an even larger indirect economic interest due to the shipping lanes that pass through Southeast Asia. These lanes, primarily the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea, carry US trade with South Asia and the Middle East and are vital to economies of three of the US's top six trading partners, China, Japan, and South Korea. That factor alone gives it weight nearly on par to the Middle East for the US economy. While most US partners in the Middle East do not share its values, several in Southeast Asia do. Indonesia, the most populous country, is consolidating its democratic, open society. Democracy and freedom in the Philippines are also growing stronger, while Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore have electoral systems that allow at least the possibility of legitimate changes in government. Though Thailand is sliding away from US values again after its most recent coup, Myanmar has made initial progress towards reforming its own military government. ASEAN as an institution has slowly moved closer to full support of US backed international norms during its 45 years of existence<sup>60</sup>, turning Southeast Asia into the type of stable region that is mutually beneficial to all.

China's recent actions have caused several of these countries to be more concerned about military conflicts. The largest concern is over competing claims in the South China Sea, and correspondingly the perception of China as a source of conflict is largest in three of the claimant states – Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, with smaller majorities in Indonesia and Thailand sharing that concern.<sup>61</sup> From the US

perspective, China's extensive claims in the South China Sea and adherence to a minority interpretation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) combine to pose a threat to freedom of navigation and through that vital US interests.

The US response to this threat has been measured but apparent. While several members of ASEAN perceive China's behavior as disruptive and intentionally divisive<sup>62</sup>, several governments and their populations have come to view the US as their most important potential ally despite past issues.<sup>63</sup> The most rapid response has been from the military, has which increased presence and training in multiple countries but on a relatively small scale. The US has made less progress on the economic component of this response, the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement that includes four ASEAN members. If the agreement is finalized (current lengthy delay is due mainly to US-Japan friction<sup>64</sup>) it should increase US economic strength and propagate the US's preferred economic system. Finally, US engagement in Southeast Asia has included consideration for US values, notably with its slow and cautious re-engagement with Myanmar. To date the US has carefully balanced present day actions against long term prospects and reassuring allies without emboldening them into unnecessary provocations towards China. It has not completely compensated for the massive power imbalance between China and the ASEAN states nor healed the internal divisions of ASEAN that China has exploited. It has prevented further defections from the US promoted international norms and to date has prevented armed conflict that would greatly damage real US interests.

## **CONCLUSION**

Some commentators in the US and abroad have predicted or proclaimed the end of US power<sup>65</sup> but by recasting its foreign policy and restricting its exertions abroad the US may be able to maintain its position for the foreseeable future. The US cannot directly solve the majority of the world's problems, something it has tried too often to do in the past. In the future it must ensure it focuses its energies on the situations that truly challenge its physical and economic security even as it remains fully engaged diplomatically. The US must continue to practice its values at home, promote them abroad, and support its allies to the limits of the actions they are willing to take to counter challenges in their own regions to their own interests. Though this retrenchment will cause some to wail even more about the weakening of the US, it is the best method to keep the US strong well into the future.

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<sup>1</sup> US Code Title 50, chapter 44, sub-chapter I, 3043, Annual National Security Strategy Report. The President has failed to submit a National Security Strategy report 13 times in the 28 years since Congress created the requirement.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 144.

<sup>3</sup> National Security Strategy (NSS) of the United States, May 2010, 17.

<sup>4</sup> NSS, 17. “Positive action in one area will help advance all four.”

<sup>5</sup> To put in context, the US should not consider it a priority to retrieve every citizen and journalist who ignores US advisories to stay out of places like the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

<sup>6</sup> US Energy Information Agency data for 2013, accessed January 2015.

<http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/iedindex3.cfm?tid=5&pid=53&aid=1&cid=regions.&syid=2009&eyid=2013&unit=TBD>

<sup>7</sup> Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 595.

<sup>8</sup> “Global Opposition to US Surveillance and Drones, but Limited Harm to America’s Image,” Pew Research Center, 14 July 2014, 6. This report is based on the results of Pew’s 2014 Global Attitudes Survey.

<sup>9</sup> “Despite Torture Report, US Escapes Censure,” *Global Times*, December 11<sup>th</sup> 2014.

<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/896126.shtml>

<sup>10</sup> Peter Rodman, *Presidential Command* (New York: Random House, 2009), 109

<sup>11</sup> “Donors: Keep Out,” *Economist*, September 13<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> 2014, 68-69.

<sup>12</sup> Agreement between the Governments of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on Cooperation in the Field of International Information Security. 24 June 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Pew, P14. Pew doesn’t have polling data from many other US partners in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirate, and Qatar.

<sup>14</sup> US support for the foundation of Israel and the restoration of the Shah, though US support for Israel in 1967 and 1973 marked a major milestone.

<sup>15</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 10, 222-224, 332.

<sup>16</sup> NSS, 19.

<sup>17</sup> The US “drone” program remains particularly unpopular with a plurality or majority opposing it in 39 of 43 countries Pew surveyed in 2014. Pew, P5. The 2003 invasion of Iraq was also widely unpopular, as is the continued operation of the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay.

<sup>18</sup> Austin Long, “The Management of Savagery: Policy Options for Confronting Substate Threats” in Christopher Preble and John Mueller, eds, *A Dangerous World?* (Washington DC: Cato Institute, 2014.) Kindle edition, no page numbers.

<sup>19</sup> David Fouse, “Onaga’s Victory Means More Delays for the Futenma Replacement Facility,” Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, Dec 18<sup>th</sup> 2014. <http://www.apcss.org/editorial-onagas-victory-means-more-delays-for-the-futenma-replacement-facility-2/>

<sup>20</sup> Gates, 416. Secretary Gates also indicated President Roh, who committed suicide after leaving office, was probably “a little crazy.”

<sup>21</sup> Unattributed interviews and discussions with multiple participants and observers of these negotiations.

<sup>22</sup> Dan Horch and Christopher Drew, “Brazil Snubs Boeing in Fighter Jet Deal,” *New York Times*, December 18<sup>th</sup> 2013.

<sup>23</sup> “Germany and America: Bugging Mrs. Merkel,” *Economist*, October 26<sup>th</sup> 2013.

<sup>24</sup> David Rothkopf, “Obama’s Don’t Do Stupid Shit Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy.com*, June 4<sup>th</sup> 2014.

<sup>25</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 250.

<sup>26</sup> William F. Pickett (ed.), *George F. Kennan and the Origins of Eisenhower’s New Look: An Oral History of Project Solarium*, (Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies Monograph Series Number 1, Princeton University 2006), 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954* Volume II, Part 1, National Security Affairs, Document 79, P5, 13, 18.

<sup>28</sup> John Lew Gaddis, *The Cold War*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 63-64.

<sup>29</sup> Maxwell Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960.)

<sup>30</sup> Office of Management and Budget, Table 3.1, US Government Outlays by superfunction and function 1940-2019, accessed 2 January 2015. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/Historicals>

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- <sup>31</sup> Gaddis 2, 73.
- <sup>32</sup> Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Assent*, (New York: Random House, 1991), xxiv. Caro quotes comments Eisenhower made in unpublished draft of his memoirs.
- <sup>33</sup> Richard Gabriel and Paul Savage, *Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the US Army*, (New York: Hilly and Wang, 1979.) Also Cincinnatus, *Self-Destruction: The Disintegration and Decay of the United States Army during the Vietnam Era*, (New York: WW Norton and Company, 1981.)
- <sup>34</sup> Thomas Ricks, *The Gamble*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 122-123.
- <sup>35</sup> Andrew Bacevich, *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010), 6-12.
- <sup>36</sup> Andrew Krepinevich and Barry Watts, *The Last Warrior*, (New York: Basic Books, 2015.) Excerpted in *Foreign Policy.com* January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015.
- <sup>37</sup> SIPRI data for 2013, accessed 2 Jan 2015.  
[http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex\\_database/milexdata1988-2012v2.xls](http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database/milexdata1988-2012v2.xls)
- <sup>38</sup> Edward Luttwak, "Give War a Chance," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1999.
- <sup>39</sup> The value of the US's relationship with Israel is the subject of debate and is better addressed elsewhere. See John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007.) In response see Walter Russell Mead, "Jerusalem Syndrome," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2007 and Elliot Cohen, "Yes, It's Anti-Semitic," *Washington Post*, April 5<sup>th</sup> 2006.
- <sup>40</sup> And the political difficulty of reducing domestic energy consumption.
- <sup>41</sup> With the exception of Iran and Jordan, who was in opposition.
- <sup>42</sup> Frank Conahan, Assistant Comptroller General, National Security and International Affairs Division, Government Accounting Office, testimony before House Way and Means Committee, July 31<sup>st</sup> 1991.  
<http://www.gao.gov/assets/110/104055.pdf>
- <sup>43</sup> Walter Pincus and Dana Milbank, "Al Qaeda-Hussein Link Is Dismissed," *Washington Post*, June 17<sup>th</sup> 2004, A01.
- <sup>44</sup> Daniel Trotta, "Iraq war costs U.S. more than \$2 trillion: study," *Reuters*, March 14<sup>th</sup> 2013.  
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/14/us-iraq-war-anniversary-idUSBRE92D0PG20130314> Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz projected a \$3 trillion dollar cost in 2008 including indirect economic costs that other economists have questioned. The amount directly expended by the US Government was approximately \$800 billion as of 2013 plus additional spending and projected future spending on veterans' benefits.
- <sup>45</sup> Missy Ryan and Erin Cunningham, "U.S. advisers in Iraq stay out of combat but see fighting edging closer," *Washington Post*, January 1<sup>st</sup> 2015.
- <sup>46</sup> Anne Clunan and Harold Trinkunas, eds, *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*, (Stanford: Stanford Security Studies, 2010) provides a credible refutation of the assumption that ungoverned spaces are useful operating areas for terrorist organizations with international aspirations. Al Qaeda was able to operate effectively in Afghanistan because the Taliban were content to run the country with minimal international recognition and commerce while remaining impoverished; ISIL appears to be dependent on oil exports and trade to maintain the standard of living expected by the population it currently controls and thus would be much more susceptible to external pressure to provide some form of compliance with international norms. Revolutionary Iran has had to conceal and to some degree curtail their involvement with international terrorism for the same reason despite a similar ideology requiring a global struggle.
- <sup>47</sup> Micah Zenko, Amelia Mae Wolf, "The Myth of the Terrorist Safe Haven," *Foreign Policy.com*, January 26<sup>th</sup> 2015.
- <sup>48</sup> Daniel Dombay, "US and Turkey Remain Divided Over Syria Path," *Financial Times*, November 23<sup>rd</sup> 2014.
- <sup>49</sup> James Traub, "Bashar al-Assad and the Devil's Bargain," *Foreign Policy.com*, November 14<sup>th</sup> 2014.
- <sup>50</sup> President Barack Obama, "Statement of the President on ISIL," September 10<sup>th</sup> 2014.  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>
- <sup>51</sup> Zaid Al-Ali, "How Maliki Ruined Iraq," *Foreign Policy.com*, June 19<sup>th</sup> 2014.
- <sup>52</sup> I consider a nuclear armed Iran a direct threat to the Gulf States and Israel but not the US, though this does not appear to be the current position of the US government or the majority of the US foreign policy establishment. See Kenneth Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb," *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 91 Number 4, July-August 2012. Also Iran "is unlikely to initiate or intentionally provoke a conflict"

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Lieutenant General Ronald Burgess, Defense Intelligence Agency Annual Threat Assessment, February 16<sup>th</sup> 2012, as well as Michael A. Cohen, "It's Coming from Inside the House," in *A Dangerous World?*, Kindle edition location 3155.

<sup>53</sup> US Energy Information Agency, "Country Analysis: Saudi Arabia," updated September 10<sup>th</sup> 2014, 8-9. [http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/Saudi\\_Arabia/saudi\\_arabia.pdf](http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/Saudi_Arabia/saudi_arabia.pdf) Although oil and natural gas exports from other countries are significant, Saudi Arabia alone is responsible for 40% of regional production and a useful shorthand for export patterns.

<sup>54</sup> "Review of Studies of the Economic Impact of the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 Terrorist Attacks on the World Trade Center," Government Accountability Office, May 29<sup>th</sup> 2002. This early compilation estimated a cost on the order of \$100 billion but there was wide variation in the 8 studies they examined.

<sup>55</sup> Stanley Karnow, *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989.)

<sup>56</sup> M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 318-319, 339, 395-398.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas B. Pepinsky, *Economic Crisis and the Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes: Indonesia and Malaysia Comparative Perspectives*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Kindle Edition, location 5360-5407.

<sup>58</sup> Emma Chanlett-Avery and Ben Dolven, "Thailand: Background and US Relations," Congressional Research Service, June 19<sup>th</sup> 2014, P1.

<sup>59</sup> Norman G. Owen, Ed. *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005.)

<sup>60</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, "ASEAN's Future and Asian Integration," Council on Foreign Relations International Institutions and Global Governance Program, November 2013, 3-4.

<sup>61</sup> Pew, 39.

<sup>62</sup> Lee Hsien Loong, Speech given at (China) Central Party School, September 8th, 2012.

<sup>63</sup> Pew, 38. The US polled as both Indonesia's best potential ally and biggest threat, highlighting continued negative perceptions of the US in the region.

<sup>64</sup> "The Trans-Pacific Partnership: Food Fight," *Economist*, October 6<sup>th</sup> 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Ian Bremmer, "The Tragic Decline of American Foreign Policy," *The National Interest*, April 16<sup>th</sup> 2014; Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Consequences of American Decline," *Al-Jazeera American (web)*, November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013; <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/11/2/the-consequencesofusdecline.html>; Kim R. Holmes, "Massive Debt to Drive U.S. Decline," Heritage Foundation, October 30<sup>th</sup> 2009.

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