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Conclusion

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The contributors to this volume have advanced different perspectives on the challenges facing the United States in crafting a sustainable national security policy. They have offered diverse recommendations about how the United States can most effectively respond to those challenges. Nevertheless, our contributors are unanimous in one conclusion: The United States has reached a strategic crossroad. The extraordinary domestic and international transformations that have occurred in the last decade now demand a similarly profound transformation in our thinking, our policies, and our institutions. The need for such a reevaluation should have been evident years ago, but the scholarship presented in the volume strongly suggests that change can no longer wait.

Our contributors also agree that the prognosis for the future is neither irreversible decline nor a return to America's previous ascendancy, but something in between. To master the more uncertain, fragmented, and challenging international environment, however, American policymakers will have to make some hard choices. First, American leaders will have to reexamine the resources and institutions that underpin the United States' diplomacy, strategy, and military affairs. Building on lessons from previous eras of upheaval in American national security, the contributors to this volume have proposed a variety of ways to recalibrate America's resources and institutions to serve contemporary policy needs better. Second, American leaders must critically re-examine the United States' foreign commitments and assess whether America's complex web of military alliances and partnerships, many of which were formed 70 years ago, still serve the nation's interests today, or whether some of these commitments should be reformed or even discontinued. Many of these commitments cost little on a daily basis, and their costs are largely hidden from public view. Those characteristics have made it easy to carry them forward year after year, even as the costs—financial and strategic—accumulate. Like the “off-

balance-sheet” risks that ultimately bankrupted several of America’s largest banking institutions during the financial crisis of 2007–8, the real price of these commitments may only be recognized in times of emergency. Drawing on a close examination of various legacy commitments, the contributors offer a number of suggestions for refocusing American resources.

Underpinning the need to reevaluate American resources, institutions and commitments is the need to reassess our understanding of American power. Traditional American definitions of power are too narrow and are often premised on a time horizon that is too short. The authors of this book offer numerous insights on how American leaders should rethink national power and its implementation for greater long-term sustainability. Effective power, in historical and contemporary terms, is affordable, effective, and even efficient. The chapters speak to these qualities and the need to enhance them in current American policy.

KEY FINDINGS/THEMES

Six key findings and themes emerge from the contributions to this volume. First, nearly all of the authors emphasize the need to recognize explicitly the difficult tradeoffs the United States now faces in crafting a sustainable national security policy. Even at the height of its power, the United States lacked the resources, capabilities, and attention to respond to every potential threat in its environment. The need for prioritization is even more salient today in an era of constrained resources and globalized interests. Focusing our efforts on one threat or region, therefore, will inevitably come at the expense of others. Cindy Williams’ contribution reveals most directly, for example, the more dollars the US devotes to pay and benefits for military and civilian personnel and military retirees, the less it will have for force modernization and training. Jennifer Lind observes that the more military and political resources the US dedicates to Asian alliances or to counter the threat of a rising China, the less it can use in Europe to contain a resurgent Russia or in the Middle East to confront the threat of terrorist groups like ISIS. As Joshua Busby argues, efforts to contain China militarily and politically run counter to America’s strong interests in working with China to address climate change. Making these choices will be

difficult, and our contributors do not all agree on which choices will be best for American security. One of the central functions of a national security strategy is to weigh these kinds of competing priorities and prune the burgeoning list of claims on America's resources that have rendered the nation's current strategy unsustainable. Effective strategy turns on the discipline to observe limits.

Second, the contributors agree that even those aspects of American national security that should remain relatively unchanged require new justification in light of the dramatically changed strategic environment facing the United States. William Wohlforth, for example, concludes that the United States should “muddle through” with its current commitments to NATO, but he argues that the alliance has transitioned from its original role as a defensive organization to an institutional and military vehicle for US global leadership. Recognizing this new role for the alliance is critical, however, because doing so should influence America's position on contemporary policy questions such as the further enlargement of NATO and the increasing demands for “out of area” interventions—neither of which Wohlforth believes make sense for the United States today.

Third, although our contributors agree that a clearly articulated strategy is necessary for the United States to achieve sustainable security, they also agree that we must move beyond the “one-size-fits-all” approach to foreign policy that has sometimes characterized previous grand strategic debates. America's strategic environment is simply too complex to make either global retrenchment or global engagement the optimal choice. As Daniel Byman and Sara Bjerg Moller demonstrate in their analysis of the Middle East, America's diverse interests in the region argue for increasing ties with some partner states, and curtailing them with others.

The need to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach also applies to the way the United States structures its interactions with other states. American leaders should think more creatively about the ways they exercise power and influence—using the full spectrum of capabilities and institutional arrangements. As Jennifer Lind writes, in Asia the United States need not face the stark choice between scrapping its existing alliances, which some argue have outlived their

usefulness, or maintaining them in their current form. Instead, she argues, the US should consider transforming these alliances from “terminals,” which served the main function of protecting America’s allies, into “hubs,” which are designed to enhance America’s ability to project power throughout East Asia.

Similarly, Audrey Kurth Cronin argues that the debate regarding American strategy towards Afghanistan must evolve beyond the unattractive options of immediate withdrawal or indefinite war. Rather, she suggests the United States should work with other nations to “neutralize” Afghanistan. Under this arrangement, the government of Afghanistan would agree to remain neutral in the political and military disputes in South Asia, and external actors like India, Pakistan, Iran, Russia and the United States would agree not to intervene in Afghanistan’s internal affairs. Creative and carefully customized solutions such as these will allow the United States to maximize its influence, even in an era of decreasing resources.

Fourth, American foreign policy leaders must pay close attention to the essential domestic sources of power. Jonathan Kirshner and Jeremi Suri both elucidate the importance of managing financial and monetary markets by providing incentives for productive capital investments that ultimately serve consumer and security needs. Kirshner emphasizes intelligent financial regulations that protect a strong currency. Suri focuses on the institutional capacity for taxing citizens and attracting foreign capital at low cost. Managing currency, taxation, and capital markets needs more attention and calibration with foreign commitments, according to these authors. If the United States regulates and taxes intelligently, it will have more resources for its global aims.

Fifth, institutions matter more than policymakers often realize. The organizations that govern American representatives abroad must become more flexible, focused, and efficient to better match constrained resources with ambitious policy aims. John Hall argues that creating a culture of innovation within the armed services is crucial, particularly among military officers rising through the ranks. This requires more emphasis on free-thinking, and even dissent, within military education and promotion boards. William Inboden observes that the national security

decision-making process, frequently reformed, requires continual readjustment to ensure that presidents get the kinds of advice they need for the challenges of their time. The National Security Council (and its associated bodies) has often lacked creativity because it expends too much energy on turf battles and gives too little attention to integrating different perspectives into a coherent policy discussion among principals. The military, the NSC, and other US security organizations must learn to embrace change and controlled risk-taking, rather than the slow moving accumulation of claims on resources that have characterized past bureaucratic battles. Leaner institutions can be more effective and sustainable.

Sixth, and perhaps most fundamental, all of the chapters in this volume recognize that sustainability is a moving target. Yesterday's wise and efficient decisions can quickly become misguided and exorbitant in tomorrow's security environment. The geopolitics of the international system change faster than ever before, and the nation's security strategy must adjust faster to keep up. The deliberations and disciplined thinking that the chapters call for must occur continuously within the US government, and policymakers must be willing to rethink inherited positions and commitments with greater frequency. America must have the institutional structures in place that provide incentives for the individuals entrusted with formulating and implementing American national security strategy to engage in this kind of continual reevaluation. Strategy is a process, and the chosen policy outcomes are neither foreordained nor permanent.

An ever-adjusting strategy is more likely to bring success than a traditional strategy, like containment, that became totemic, freezing American commitments. In recent decades, the United States has often chosen to adjust strategy by adding more—more foreign commitments, more weapons, and more spending. That approach multiplies the problems and the costs. A sustainable strategy will have to give up some old things to do new things; it will have to reduce its emphasis in some places as it increases its actions in others. Strategic wisdom requires tough choices, frankly addressed and implemented. This is where political will must accompany disciplined thought. Strategy, like war, is the extension of politics by other means.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The contributors to this volume have offered original perspectives on the future of American foreign policy and marshalled new evidence on the costs and benefits of America's most important foreign policy choices. Although this scholarship represents the beginning of a much longer debate, it also highlights key areas in need of further research. Several critical questions deserve more sustained attention from scholars in the years ahead.

Americans tend to assume that their democratic system and values naturally translate into international power. That is not necessarily the case. Often, as the chapters show, domestic American behaviors misdirect attention and resources from their most important needs abroad. Foreign actors understand the American system, and they frequently seek to exploit it for their own purposes. Therefore, scholars should give more attention to how democratic policymakers can better leverage the American economy, political system, and military to maximize national security. What are the best ways to conduct a democratic and strategic foreign policy? How should leaders redesign democratic institutions for a sustainable foreign policy? How should leaders acquire the necessary resources, and how should they educate the public about their policies?

Contributors to this volume have examined examples of American commitments to NATO, South Asia, East Asia and the Middle East, but these analyses have only scratched the surface. Since the United States must evaluate its foreign commitments on a case-by-case basis, a systematic country-by-country inventory of all foreign commitments remains urgently necessary. Such an enterprise will require the work of historians and political scientists with deep regional expertise; it is not a task that any single scholar can undertake alone. It is, in fact, well suited to the kind of collaborative effort that produced this volume.

While the chapter authors have explored the direct costs and benefits of alliances to American security, further research is required to understand the indirect and non-security consequences of America's foreign commitments. The debate surrounding the value of these commitments involves more than just the important question about how efficiently our alliances

provide security for the US and its friends. Alliances offer other potential costs and benefits as well. Do America's alliances allow us to secure important economic concessions from our partners? Do they allow the United States to constrain allies from risky behaviors that could lead to conflict? Or, do American security guarantees generate a "moral hazard" that emboldens allies to initiate conflicts with more powerful neighbors, assuming US protection if risk-taking provokes disaster? Do America's alliances generate anger or apprehension in regional powers like Russia, China and Iran, making cooperation with them more difficult? Or do they dampen regions security dilemmas, reducing the risk of war? Does America's presence abroad deter or provoke non-state challengers, especially terrorist groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)?

The proposals in this volume to change the process and substance of American policymaking hinge on the ability of leaders to imagine a different world—one where the United States curtails some long-standing foreign commitments and establishes new ones; one where American resources are concentrated on fewer priorities, with greater attention to the balance between costs and benefits. Redesigning security policy in these terms requires a broader exploration of options and a more rigorous analysis of unintended outcomes than is standard in current policy deliberations, as the chapters in this volume show. Above all, policy planners will need to undertake a more systematic counterfactual analysis of likely results from changes in US policy—analysis more open to different judgments than the worst-case assumptions that accompany most assessments of commitment reform and military de-escalation, especially around lingering regional and terrorist crises.

Drawing on history and theory, several of the contributors suggest how more rigorous and open counterfactual analysis can be conducted. They point to the importance of interrogating assumptions, looking to alternative historical precedents, and applying strict cost accountings. Developing these and other methodologies further is a continuing task for scholars. It is indeed our job to expand the imagining of overworked policy-makers.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The scholars represented in this volume strongly agree that American foreign policy should result from deliberate choices about what is best for America and the world, rather than inertia or fear of the unknown. Unfortunately, the contributors also recognize that the American political system provides few incentives to conduct the thorough policy reevaluation that the United States sorely needs. If anything, current politics encourage tough talk and multiplying commitments to avoid the appearance of weakness or to cater to domestic and international interest groups, often with inadequate funding and limited preparations for negative consequences. We suggest three mechanisms that might help to generate the pressures necessary for fundamental policy change.

First, political leaders, scholars, and other advocates of reforming America's national security strategy must work harder to get the public actively involved in foreign policy debates. As Benjamin Valentino's chapter on public opinion shows, the American public places little pressure on elites to make the kinds of hard choices in foreign policy that all the contributors to this volume believe are necessary. Although the public recognizes the heavy costs of America's foreign commitments, they have been offered no other option for maintaining American security in what they perceive to be an increasingly dangerous world. More important, much of the public remains apathetic and detached from foreign policy issues. Even widespread public fears of terrorism are strangely separated from any serious public engagement with US policy in the Middle East.

The majority of American citizens do not follow foreign affairs in any region closely. The main costs of American foreign policy are borne by the increasingly small and unrepresentative segment of society that serves in the nation's all-volunteer military. The public is largely shielded from the enormous financial costs of American military interventions because recent wars have been financed primarily through borrowing, not taxing. One way to bring about change in American national security strategy is to educate the public better about the ways in which American foreign policy affects their lives. Citizens need to understand the real trade-offs in

allocating resources, and they need to be presented with alternative strategies for maintaining America's security. We hope that this volume represents a contribution to that effort.

Second, the United States government should work to streamline American foreign policy budgeting – including the “black” intelligence budget and various “off-budget” costs – to make it easier for citizens to understand where and how their dollars are being spent. At present, the complexity of the U.S. government and its budgeting procedures makes it nearly impossible for even the best-informed citizens to assess where our money is going and what it is buying. Many citizens, for example, vastly over-estimate how much the United States spends on foreign aid. They also under-estimate the true size of the American military budget, including intelligence and other related agencies.

More transparency about the true costs of our national security would have many beneficial effects. It would allow citizens and leaders to recognize where the nation's deepest ambitions do not match allocated resources—either because the government is short-changing its priorities or over-spending on non-priority commitments. Transparency would also have the general effect of educating citizens about what national security costs in the contemporary world, and how those burdens are distributed—often unfairly—across the population. Most important, clearer reporting about government policies would encourage more substantive debate about policy choices, their costs, and their consequences. If sustainable choices require more knowledge about policy and strategy, then revitalized democratic accountability around international affairs should prove transformative.

Finally, our contributors believe that a thorough reassessment of American national security strategy will be more likely, and more fruitful, if America's leaders are compelled to articulate a grand strategy -- to be specific about America's interests in the world, what the key threats to those interests are, and how best to respond to them. A vague and ambiguous strategy is a key enabler of strategic inertia and bloat. Platitudes like “strengthening an unrivaled alliance system,” or “sustaining American leadership” or building a military that will “remain dominant in

every domain”—all drawn from the 2015 National Security Strategy—promise everything and nothing at once.¹

Without the discipline provided by a clearly articulated strategy, America becomes the country that cannot say no. In these undisciplined circumstances, each branch of government and military service is incentivized to make its own assumptions about where America’s interests lie and how best to defend them. Every domestic interest group or foreign lobby is free to make its own claims on US foreign policy. A sustainable national security strategy, therefore, must specify not only what America will do, but also what it will not do. Advocates of change must demand specifics and hold policymakers to account when they fail to provide them.²

Together, these policy recommendations point to the potential for a more sustainable and successful American foreign policy, despite resource constraints and multiplying challenges. The United States continues to benefit from favorable geopolitical circumstances, a stable government, and rich resource endowments. There is no country the United States would trade places with. The greatest threat to the long-term security of the United States comes not from a foreign enemy, but from the misuse of American capabilities.

This volume offers the foundation for a renaissance of American strategy that will study, promote, and ultimately implement a more sustainable approach to securing the nation. More than anything, the future of the United States will turn on the strategic wisdom of the next generation. Cooperation between scholars and policy-makers, exemplified in the making of this volume, will be crucial for that necessary work. Current difficulties open a promising opportunity.

¹ See https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf.

² For more on these points, see James Goldgeier and Jeremi Suri, “Revitalizing the U.S. National Security Strategy,” *Washington Quarterly* 38 (Winter 2015).