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Why the World Still Needs America's Military Might

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Sometimes you don't miss something until it's gone. While this old chestnut is most often rolled out when referring to a lost but seemingly troubled love, or a trying but departed friend, it might be said for American military might as well.

Indeed, many are predicting that we're entering the twilight of American power—American preeminence. This notion is no doubt reinforced by the current economic troubles, a contagion that seemingly began in the United States and has since spread around the world.

While it might be true that American power has peaked in a comprehensive way, certainly in relative terms, especially with the rise of China, Russia, India, and Brazil, I would suggest that American power, particularly its military dominance, might be sorely missed in the years to come if America is indeed on the wane—a refrain, I'll remind you, that we've heard before.

For those who may greet a decline in American power with glee, I admonish you: Be careful what you wish for. You'll be sorry when it's gone. Let's conjure up for a moment what a world without American military power might look like.

The Korean Peninsula

Let's start with the Korean Peninsula.

Ever since the cease-fire agreement between North Korean and Chinese forces and the United Nations was concluded in 1953, the United States military has been the predominant force reducing the risk of

Talking Points

- Military might is not the answer to every problem, but it has often played an important role in international politics. As one American statesman said, diplomacy without the credible threat of military force is nothing but a prayer.
- America should seek consensus before making a decision, while other nations should recognize that they must also bear the burden of keeping the international order upright and shipshape.
- Unfortunately, American military might has become an international public good: one that is greatly underappreciated, but one that many would like to command—without the attendant sacrifices in blood and treasure.
- The United States is not the world's policeman; nor does it want to be. We have no right to force others to believe as we believe. But freedom and democracy are superior to such dark alternatives as oppression and tyranny.

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another conflict on the divided Korean Peninsula. Indeed, even today—55 years hence—an American four-star general leads the Combined Forces Command of U.S. and Republic of Korea forces that keep the peace against a North Korean regime that still harbors dreams of uniting—militarily if necessary—the North and South under its despotic rule.

Nearly 30,000 U.S. soldiers stand shoulder to shoulder with 650,000 South Korean forces across a surely misnamed demilitarized zone (DMZ)—arguably the last vestige of the Cold War—detering over one million, ideologically driven North Korean troops. Even though peace has not been officially declared between the two nations, the odds of a conflict breaking out across the DMZ remain slim due to America's commitment to stability on the peninsula.

I would suggest that absent the presence of American forces and the military might behind it, including an extension the U.S.'s nuclear umbrella to South Korea, the history of the past 50 years might be quite different from what has been recorded today. A second Korean war has been—and still is—a distinct but unfortunate possibility, and I would speculate that a new war would be even more horrific than the last, if that is possible.

In March 2008, a North Korean news reader on state television said that if the South Korean government made even the slightest gesture of an attack, “Everything will be in ashes, not just a sea of fire, if our advanced pre-emptive strike once begins.”

Considering that the capital of South Korea—Seoul, a city of more than 10 million—lies within range of 10,000 pieces of Korean People's Army artillery, which could rain an estimated one million rounds on the city in the opening hours of a conflict, I think we have to take that commentator at his word.

Japan

And what about Japan?

American military might has been primarily responsible for Japanese security since the end of World War II. This has not only allowed Japan to prosper economically and politically—like South Korea and Germany, I might add—but has also kept Japan at peace with its neighbors.

The presence of U.S. forces and the American nuclear deterrent has also kept Japan from exercising a nuclear option that many believe it might take, considering the rise of China, North Korea's nuclear breakout, its advanced scientific and technical capabilities, and indigenous nuclear power industry—a producer of a significant amount of fissile material from its reactors.

Political and historical considerations aside, many believe that Japan could quickly join the once-exclusive nuclear weapons club if it chose to do so, resulting in unforetold challenges to regional security.

China and Taiwan

Further to the south, what about stability across the Taiwan Strait?

We know that China is undergoing a major military buildup, especially involving its power projection forces—i.e., air force, navy, and ballistic missile forces, all aimed at Taiwan. Indeed, today Beijing has the world's third largest defense budget and the world's fastest growing *peacetime* defense budget, growing at over 10 percent per year for over a decade. It increased its defense budget nearly 18 percent annually over the past two years.

I would daresay that military tensions across the 100-mile-wide Taiwan Strait between Taiwan and China would be much greater today if not for an implied commitment on the part of the United States to prevent a change in the political status quo via military means. China hasn't renounced the use of force against its neighbor and rival, Taiwan, a vibrant, free-market democracy. It is believed by many analysts that absent American military might, China would quickly unite Taiwan with the mainland under force of arms.

In general, the system of military alliances in Asia that the United States maintains provides the basis for stability in the Pacific, since the region has failed to develop an overarching security architecture such as that found in Europe in NATO.

Europe, Russia, and NATO

And what of Europe?

I hope we can all agree that NATO was a critical element in the security of Europe during the Cold War. In fact, I would argue that American military

power was a *sine qua non* of NATO's success during the Cold War.

Today, the likelihood of a major war in Europe is thankfully just about nil, but troubling issues such as Bosnia and Kosovo have required American military participation—and leadership. But what about the resurgence of Russia on the edges of NATO and the European Union? Which direction will Moscow take in the years to come? It's not fully clear, but some of the signs are quite ominous.

We do know that Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has promised a nearly 30 percent increase in the Russian defense budget for 2009 for reasons that can only be associated with a desire by Moscow to exert increasing leverage in its traditional sphere of influence—and perhaps beyond. We also know Russia has conducted more ballistic missile tests this year than any year since the end of the Cold War.

We further know that the Kremlin has planted a flag on the seabed at the North Pole, asserting claims to an area the size of France, Germany, and Italy combined—an area which may hold one-third of the world's total undiscovered energy reserves. Russian action in Georgia and threats against Ukraine aren't comforting, either.

Considering the weak defense spending in Europe, who will be able to stand up to this *new* Russia if necessary? I would suggest that, absent American military might, NATO—or any future European defense force—might be little more than a paper tiger in the shadow of the Russian bear.

And who will provide balance to Iran's rise in the Middle East? It's my view that Iran has grand ambitions for itself, including regional hegemony, attempting to exert its influence across the Middle East from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea.

Which country's military is capable of projecting sufficient power into that part of the world to prevent such a potentially destabilizing turn of events? Only the United States.

The same is true for the U.S.–NATO operations in Afghanistan and Coalition operations in Iraq today. Few—if any—countries today could sustain power-projection operations for so long so far from their shores.

Beyond Geopolitics

And beyond geopolitics?

The United States military has also been a central player in the attempts to halt weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missile proliferation. In 2003, President Bush created the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), an initiative to counter the spread of WMD and their delivery systems throughout the world. The U.S. military's capabilities help put teeth in the PSI, a voluntary, multilateral organization of 90-plus nations which uses national laws and joint military operations to fight proliferation.

While many of the PSI's efforts aren't made public due to the potential for revealing sensitive intelligence sources and methods, some operations do make their way to the media. For instance, according to the U.S. State Department, the PSI stopped exports to Iran's missile program and heavy water-related equipment to Tehran's nuclear program, which many believe is actually a nuclear weapons program.

In the same vein, the United States is also developing the world's most prodigious-ever ballistic missile defense system to protect the American homeland, its deployed troops, allies, and friends, including Europe. While missile defense has its critics, it may provide the best answer to the spread of ballistic missiles and the unconventional payloads, including the WMD, they may carry.

Unfortunately, the missile and WMD proliferation trend is not positive. For instance, 10 years ago, there were only six nuclear weapons states. Today there are nine members of the once-exclusive nuclear weapons club, with Iran perhaps knocking at the door. Twenty-five years ago, nine countries had ballistic missiles. Today, there are 28 countries with ballistic missile arsenals of varying degrees.

This *defensive* system will not only provide deterrence to the use of these weapons, but also provide policymakers with a greater range of options in preventing or responding to such attacks, whether from a state or non-state actor.

Perhaps General Trey Obering, the Director of the Missile Defense Agency, said it best when describing the value of missile defense in countering the grow-

ing threat of WMD and delivery system proliferation: “I believe that one of the reasons we’ve seen the proliferation of these missiles in the past is that there has historically been *no* defense against them.”

In 2007, the United States also created a new command called AFRICOM—Pentagonese for African Command. Its purpose is to use American forces and resources to promote peace and stability across the vast African continent. The U.S. military’s mission is to support and train armed forces in African states and regional security arrangements so they can appropriately respond to threats, evolving crises, or even humanitarian disasters such as the genocide in Darfur.

In addition, US defense intelligence assets, especially satellites, provide critical information to allied governments and the international community, including early warning of crises and ongoing support during emergencies or hostilities. For example, U.S. intelligence collection was critical in the Colombian army’s rescue of 15 hostages held by the FARC guerilla group, including a former presidential candidate, this past summer.

The reach of the U.S. military was also critical in providing aid to tsunami victims in Southeast Asia and the devastating earthquake in Pakistan. The American medical ship USNS *Mercy* and the amphibious ship USS *Kearsarge* conduct numerous humanitarian missions around the world every year, bringing much-needed care to those in need.

Moreover, the U.S. Navy patrols the world’s oceans—free of charge, I might add—providing freedom of the seas and protecting against sea banditry and piracy, which is a growing problem, especially in Southeast Asia and off the Horn of Africa. Indeed, should Iran attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic waterway which carries 20 percent–40 percent of the world’s oil supply, which it has threatened to do on numerous occasions, the U.S. Navy is the only maritime force in the world today that could effectively intervene to keep it open—or would be willing to do so.

In addition to stationing more than 150,000 of its brave young men and women overseas in Europe and Asia, often far from kith and kin, in pursuit of peace and stability, the American military also sup-

ports the over 100,000 troops involved in U.N. peacekeeping operations around the globe.

Not only does the U.S. provide the lion’s share of the U.N. budget, including peacekeeping, but it also provides soldiers; arguably more important, America’s armed forces provide critical logistics, strategic lift, and intelligence support to these forces. In fact, former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan said that U.N. peacekeeping just can’t be done without American involvement.

Lastly, U.S. military research has supported the development of new technologies which often find their way to benefit the civilian sector—technologies which directly and indirectly support stability. These innovations include information technology, such as the creation of the Internet, communications, aviation, space systems, medicine, nuclear and alternative fuels, and even clean water technology—a critical need in the developing world today.

An Unsought Duty

Of course, in my view, this is just a cursory reflection on the importance of U.S. military power in the world today. There is also the history that stretches back to the liberation of Kuwait, not to mention the sacrifices in blood and treasure made in the last century during the Cold War and the conflicts in Vietnam, Korea, Europe, and Asia.

The United States has achieved a particular fate—one I’m not sure it would have chosen for itself. Following great wars in Europe and Asia in the last century, we—the Americans—found ourselves fully enmeshed in the fate of the international order.

To paraphrase a Founding Father, James Madison, Americans would much prefer to be the friends of liberty everywhere but the guardians only of our own. And to quote a former U.S. Senator, “America is not an imperial power, but it has become, in the absence of other alternatives, a kind of managerial power. It is no longer safe to ignore in principle what necessity has required us to accept in practice.”

Unfortunately, in the role of helping to provide for global stability, as a practical matter, there is nobody else to relieve the United States of this duty—at least for the moment. While some would like to see the United Nations in this role, it has

been nothing short of a disappointment. The U.N., in its current configuration, is fundamentally incapable of carrying out its original purposes—preventing and responding to aggression. In truth, while the U.N. means well, and often does well especially on humanitarian issues, it is hamstrung by its own diversity of values and interests, leaving it often quite feckless in dealing with the security matters that everyone agrees require action.

Of course, there are others who could fill a void left by the Americans. China and Russia seem to be aspiring to such a role, although I would assert that there are widespread and serious concerns about either of them being in that position of global influence.

An Enduring Role

Obviously, military might is not the answer to every problem, but over the millennia it has often played a central, if regrettable, role in international politics. As one American statesman said, diplomacy without the credible threat of military force is nothing but a prayer.

Unfortunately, I think that's correct.

To this end, America should seek consensus before making a decision, understanding that this end state is not always possible, while other nations should recognize that they must also bear the bur-

den of keeping the international order upright and shipshape. Unfortunately, American military might has become an international public good: one which, in my estimation, is greatly underappreciated, but one that many would like to command—without the attendant sacrifices in blood and treasure, of course.

The United States is not the world's policeman; nor does it want to be. We have no right to force others to believe as we believe. But I hope I am not alone in believing that freedom and democracy are superior to such dark alternatives as oppression and tyranny.

The fact is that, like it or not, for the moment, there isn't any better deal out there—as we say in the States—for promoting global stability based on our transatlantic shared values of democracy and human rights than the United States of America. While many may wish for the demise of American military power, I'll warn you one more time: Be careful what you wish for. I promise you, you'll miss it when it's gone.

—Peter Brookes is a Senior Fellow for National Security Affairs at The Heritage Foundation. He is also a member of the congressional U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission. These remarks were delivered at a meeting of the University Philosophical Society at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland.