

We Have to Be There Because We Have to Be There — The Future of U.S. Engagement

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July 11, 2010

One of the major advantages of being the world's only superpower, as the U.S. was for much of the last twenty years, is that the U.S. was the only country strong enough to be able to have influence across the globe. A major disadvantage which confronts the U.S. is that because of its power, it has to be concerned about what happens more or less everywhere across the globe. Over the last decades, the U.S. has maneuvered itself into a position where virtually every country is important and every region is strategically vital. There are some exceptions to this, notably in Africa, but that too is changing. This began with the global struggle of the Cold War, but has continued well beyond that conflict.

To some extent this is inevitable in an age when the biggest security threats to the U.S. come from terrorist networks with global reach and where climate change and economic crises affect all parts of the world. Nonetheless, the extent of U.S. commitment everywhere, which was once a sign of the American ascendancy, now bears many signs of being part of America's decline. This will likely become more apparent and problematic if the economy does not recover. As local and national governments are stressed and basic domestic needs become more and more difficult for governments to afford, it is likely that voices calling for a more modest foreign policy with fewer commitments abroad will be stronger, but policy makers will find it very difficult to turn that aspiration into reality.

Faced with enduring economic problems it is not unreasonable for Americans to question the nature and extent of their country's commitments overseas. The sentiment that the U.S. should focus on creating jobs, building infrastructure and providing services domestically before seeking to pursue a state building agenda overseas is powerful. It is made more powerful by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which are now among the longest in American history, and which are not likely to be concluded any time soon. If this sentiment turns into a political force, it could be significant.

Turning this political force into policy will be extremely difficult because the U.S. is so entrenched in so much of the world and because our reasons for being so deeply involved have been well honed for decades. Thus a simple question which might have arisen, for example, from Secretary of State Clinton's recent trip to the South Caucasus such as why does the U.S. care what political system Armenia has or whether or not the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict gets resolved, which might be raised by an advocate for a less engaged foreign policy, can be met with detailed and thorough answers including issues of energy security, limiting Russian influence, support for the struggle against terrorism and the

like. These answers are not just rationalizations as they reflect the complex global web of American interests and commitments.

The need for an internationalist and indeed interventionist foreign policy has nonetheless become something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. It seemingly based on a logic that suggests we need to have a presence throughout the world because if not we won't have a presence in various parts of the world, but the story has been fleshed out so that this line of argument is reasonably accurate.

The U.S. has backed itself into a corner where it has to care about every corner of the planet even if it cannot afford to and would rather pursue a dramatically different foreign policy. The illogic of the situation is that relatively sound explanations can, and are, offered to explain why a particular country, region, conflict or problem is of critical import to the U.S. However, these individual explanations contribute to a foreign policy framework that is increasingly constricting and burdensome for a country that has lost the luxury to not be involved.