

Finding an Alternative World Order

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, FEB 14 2017

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As the Cold War was ending American President George H.W. Bush and Soviet Communist Party Chairman Mikhail Gorbachev declared there was a new world order emerging that would be based upon cooperation between the two superpowers. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, only one super power remained to provide order. Filled with both goodwill and vast hubris, the United States has set for itself the unsustainable task of maintaining global security. It is unsustainable because such a world order is neither in America's interest nor has the consent of those who it wants to subject to its writ.

Although it is possible to concoct long causal chains that tie American safety or prosperity to the fate of failing states in Africa or ethnic conflict in the Balkans, most global problems are distant and more important to others than they are to the United States. On the contrary, the involvement of the United States in these distant problems can be said to threaten American interests. Interventions produce enemies with some affected assuming that it is not altruistic motives that drive the United States, but rather plots to steal their resources or defame their religion. And there are real costs. American soldiers die in these distant fights and American domestic needs are neglected. Vast sums are wasted to corruption and in the frustrations of conducting military operations far from home and with limited objectives and interests. Confrontations occur with those that have direct interests involved, risking wider wars.

There are objections. Those challenged by the United States, including Russia, China, and many in the Middle East, deny the legitimacy of its actions, and see them as imperialistic meddling in the affairs of others. Even America's allies worry about the wisdom of its intervention, most especially the invasion of Iraq. People the world over concern themselves with who is going to be the next president of the United States, despite the fact that they cannot vote in its elections, because of the impact presidential choice has on United States' foreign policy and the propensity to intervene in their neighborhoods.

Some Americans hope that the United States will come to its strategic senses and abandon the quest to manage global security. Others believe that the expansion of the welfare state, especially with the implementation of national health insurance and the aging of the population, will curtail military spending in the United States and the temptations of being the world's sole super power. The economy too is a potential restraining factor as the American global policing wars of the post-Cold War era have been financed through extensive borrowing that someday will come due. And American taxpayers may eventually realize that global policing is in fact a large subsidy for the rich nations of Europe and Asia that choose to host American forces and reduce their own.

If not the United States in the lead then who? The alternatives are not robust. The UN does significant peacekeeping, particularly in Africa, but is limited in resources and by the Security Council's veto constrained mandates. There are indeed persistent problems in member participation, troop training, discipline, equipment, and sustainment for UN peacekeepers. And although they have been forced to do some serious fighting at times to separate or suppress warring factions, they cannot conduct sustained combat operations without the military weight of a major power. Regional organizations such as the African Union and the European Union are also active in peacekeeping both in conjunction with the UN and on their own. Supplementing their work are relief organizations such as the International

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Red Cross, Doctors without Borders, and the International Rescue Committee. All of this is vital, but not enough.

Serious change can come about only when the United States actually does less international intervening. Others will do more, if slowly, the argument can be made when the United States does less because they are closer to most trouble and it is their security that actually is at risk. Aid and accepting refugees from troubled areas is not enough. The rich and big nations of the world will have to fill the vacuum left as the United States pulls back from managing global security, The test cases are Libya and Syria where American reluctance to act has been most visible.

For some regions of the world the solution is readily available or easily constructed. The United States is clearly going to continue to monitor, manage and meddle in the security of North America and the Caribbean. There is no way to stop it from doing so. It is too big, too powerful and too close. The European Union or a NATO minus the United States and Canada can easily control security in Europe or even deal with a resentful Russia. The EU has more than 500,000,000 people and is as rich as the United States. It should have no need for or any claim on American troops for the security of Europe.

Harder problems exist in security arrangements for South America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. For South America the problem some might see is keeping the United States out. But the United States' interest in South America after the Second World War was largely focused on a fear of the spread of Communism and the influence of the Soviet Union, both of which are fading from memory. The South American nations themselves have several boundary problems, but little inclination to settle them through the use of force at least in recent years. Most South American nations focus their attention on economic growth which is sporadic but not non-existent. Self-restraint has fortunately tempered the competition for regional dominance and arms racing.

In Asia the prime security issue is how to accommodate the rise of a richer, more assertive China. But many nations in Asia have large populations and growing economies as well. The need is to develop regional institutions that can temper territorial disputes without interrupting the pathway to continued prosperity. Some nations, particularly Japan, Australia, Vietnam, and Taiwan want the United States to be the region's balancer to an ever more powerful China. No doubt the United States needs to think of ways to adjust to the new China, its only possible global challenger, but getting involved in conflicting claims about the ownership of rocky islands in the waters between China and its neighbors is likely not one of them (Lee, 2015). The neighbors have a strong interest in keeping the region peaceful. That likely also means keeping China helping in the taming of a nuclear and unpredictable North Korea.

The vast region that encompasses North Africa and the Middle East is beset by security problems that outsiders can neither seemingly settle nor fully escape. Colonialism left behind non-viable boundaries. Although there are many natural resources, the most exportable is oil which usually enriches rulers, not the masses. Islam, the dominant faith, is torn apart by sectarian divides, enraged by the tensions of modernization and dogged by intractable conflicts like Kashmir and the Arab/Israeli one. It is land governed weakly or exploitatively, but rarely democratically. But the rich nations of the world own at least part of chaos as they are all consumers of oil, former colonialists and/ or occasional interveners. They also get many of the refugees and see all of the images of the suffering.

There may be limited interventions in North Africa and the Middle East by coalitions of the willing, but not many seem willing to be one of the willing. The United States will likely find its interventionist urges in the region tamed by memories of past failed efforts, high casualties, wasted assistance, and the lack of effective international and local partners. Some former colonial powers may feel a continuing obligation to help, but they too have memories of past failures. Russia has intervened to save the Syrian regime, but alienating others in the process, deepening the Sunni/Shia divide and provoking Turkey. Some in both Africa and the Middle East can defend themselves, but most cannot. The rise of a regional hegemon is possible, but the area is full of rivals. What is left is continuing turmoil and perhaps disaster.

About the author:

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