

America Unrestrained?: Engagement, Retrenchment, and Libertarian Foreign Policy

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Executive Summary

While libertarians often disagree with one another, there is broad agreement among them about the need to change American foreign policy. They believe the United States should pursue a political-military retrenchment by forswearing intervention in the affairs of other states and exiting the alliances it has formed since 1945. By doing so, libertarians believe the United States will be at war less and a free society will flourish as a result. The size of its military would shrink, they argue, which would in turn reduce the financial burden it places on American taxpayers and the threat the national security state poses to individual liberty.

However, using retrenchment as the basis for a libertarian foreign policy is unlikely to serve libertarian ends. Retrenchment ignores the relationship between the international political environment and domestic political order. At the same time, libertarian advocates for retrenchment have overestimated the benefits it will provide for a free society, while overlooking the risks it presents. Instead, libertarians should embrace a grand strategy of engagement that maintains America's core military alliances while pursuing reforms that will constrain American leaders' tendency to use military force recklessly.

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Introduction

One of the many remarkable features of the 2016 presidential campaign was the number of libertarians who found hope in Donald Trump’s “America First” foreign policy. To be sure, the overwhelming majority of libertarians found Trump’s candidacy, and subsequent election, grotesque. However, a number of libertarians saw in America First—with its supposed repudiation of nation building and overt hostility to America’s allies—a foreign policy they could rally behind. Some of these individuals operate at the fringes of the libertarian movement, but even some mainstream libertarian voices had positive things to say about Trump as he belatedly criticized the invasion of Iraq and hinted that he might pull out of NATO.¹

Several libertarian supporters of Trump’s foreign policy have expressed “buyer’s remorse” as he launched cruise missiles against Assad regime forces in Syria, escalated the bombing campaign against the Islamic State, ramped up counterterrorism operations in Yemen and elsewhere, promised to rain “fire and fury” on North Korea, increased the number of American troops in Afghanistan, and refused to certify that Iran was in compliance with the deal to curb its nuclear program.² But as a candidate, Trump

¹ While many libertarians rightly denounced Donald Trump, a number of prominent libertarians have had supportive things to say about Trump’s candidacy because of his opposition to the American foreign policy status quo. Justin Raimondo of *Antiwar.com* lauded Trump’s challenge to the “establishment,” and his “America First” foreign policy. See Justin Raimondo, “Trump Against the War Party,” *Antiwar.com*, October 7, 2015, accessed October 17, 2016, available at: <http://original.antiwar.com/justin/2015/10/06/trump-against-the-war-party/>. Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute used Trump as a way to criticize Hillary Clinton’s foreign policy. See Doug Bandow, “Hillary Clinton Criticizes Donald Trump, Reveals Herself to be Queen of War,” *Huffington Post*, June 9, 2016, accessed October 17, 2016, available at: <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/hillary-clinton-criticizes-donald-trump-reveals-herself-be-queen-war>. But Bandow also suggested Trump would have a less militaristic foreign policy despite the candidate’s own statements to the contrary, see Doug Bandow, “Donald Trump Dismisses U.S. Foreign Policy Elite: Would He Save Americans From Unnecessary War?” *Forbes*, May 16, 2016, accessed October 17, 2016, available at: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/dougbandow/2016/05/16/donald-trump-dismisses-u-s-foreign-policy-elite-would-he-save-americans-from-unnecessary-war/#4491dd474b80>. See also Ivan Eland, “Trump’s Foreign Policy is the Realism America Needs,” *New York Post*, April 29, 2016, accessed October 17, 2016, available at: <http://nypost.com/2016/04/29/trumps-foreign-policy-is-the-realism-america-needs/>. In an interview with Nick Gillespie of *Reason*, libertarian historian Thaddeus Russell expressed approval for Trump’s foreign policy. See Nick Gillespie and Jim Epstein, “Donald Trump, Peacenik President?: Historian Thaddeus Russell on Trump’s Libertarian Foreign Policy,” *Reason*, Hit & Run blog, November 10, 2016, accessed October 17, 2016, available at: <http://reason.com/blog/2016/11/10/donald-trump-peacenik-president>. Kentucky Congressman Thomas Massie stated after the election that Trump was one of his top choices for the Republican nomination in 2016 because he believed that, as president, Trump would be reluctant to involve the United States in new wars. See Massie’s comments at “Opening Remarks,” at “Foreign Policy in America’s Interest: Realism, Nationalism, and the Next President,” event from *The American Conservative*, Washington, DC, November 15, 2016, available at: <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/watch-foreign-policy-in-americas-interest/>. Senator Rand Paul, the U.S. Senate’s “sole libertarian,” has expressed sympathy for Trump’s foreign policy because of his opposition to nation building and alliances. See Rand Paul, “Do Not Let Elliot Abrams Anywhere Near the State Department,” *Rare*, February 7, 2017, accessed October 1, 2017, available at: <http://rare.us/rare-politics/rand-paul-do-not-let-elliott-abrams-anywhere-near-the-state-department/>; and “Montenegro Joining NATO is Against U.S. Interests,” March 30, 2017, accessed October 1, 2017, available at: <http://time.com/4718958/montenegro-nato-rand-paul/>. At least one leading libertarian thinker who otherwise staunchly opposed Trump’s candidacy also believed Trump’s “few good ideas” came in the realm of foreign policy. See David Boaz, “Trump’s (few) Good Ideas,” *PBS Newshour*, November 9, 2016, accessed November 10, 2016, available at: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/column-trumps-good-ideas/#.WCTazrP4wm4.twitter>.

² Justin Raimondo, “I Voted for Trump. After Syria, I Feel Betrayed,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 2017, accessed October 10, 2017, available at: <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-raimondo-trump-betrayal-antiwar-20170421-story.html>; and Doug Bandow, “Why is Trump Abandoning the Foreign Policy that Brought him Victory?” *The National Interest*, March 10, 2017,

never really hid what he was selling. On the campaign trail, Trump not only rejected core libertarian principles such as the free movement of goods and people, but also said, “I really love war, in a certain way,” promised to torture terrorism suspects and go after their families, and repeatedly stated his desire to “take” Iraqi oil.³ That any supporter of a free society would back a candidate expressing such sentiments is puzzling.

A partial explanation for the initial sympathy among some libertarians for Trump’s foreign policy can be found with his opponent. Hillary Clinton, throughout her career, has been a consistently hawkish interventionist.⁴ That explanation is incomplete, though. While libertarian support for America First was limited, it represented a broader problem in libertarian foreign policy thinking.

Libertarianism is perhaps most famous for the internal disagreements of its adherents. However, one broad area of agreement among American libertarians is that the United States needs to be less involved in the world. While libertarians want diplomatic and commercial relations with the world, they believe the American government should have little political or military attachment to other countries and should avoid meddling in their internal affairs. George Washington’s warning against “foreign entanglements,” Thomas Jefferson’s call for “peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations; entangling alliances with none,” and John Quincy Adams’ axiom that America “goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy” combine to form the lodestar of libertarian foreign policy.⁵

accessed October 10, 2017, available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/why-trump-abandoning-the-foreign-policy-brought-him-victory-19738?page=show>. After the election, Ted Galen Carpenter of the Cato Institute referred to Trump’s campaign statements on foreign policy as a “bright spot” but worried he was going back on promises to reassess American alliances. See Ted Galen Carpenter, “Washington Should Reassess, Not Reassure, U.S. Allies,” Cato Institute, Cato-@-Liberty, February 13, 2017, accessed February 13, 2017, available at: https://www.cato.org/blog/washington-should-reassess-not-reassure-us-allies?utm_content=buffer9a562&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer.

³ See, Nick Gass, “Trump Camp Tries to Clarify His ‘I Love War’ Comment,” *Politico*, September, 7, 2016, accessed October 18, 2017, available at: <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/09/trump-i-love-war-comment-227818>. On torturing terrorism suspects, see Jenna Johnson, “Trump says ‘torture works,’ Backs Waterboarding and ‘Much Worse,’” *The Washington Post*, February 17, 2016, accessed October 18, 2017, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-says-torture-works-backs-waterboarding-and-much-worse/2016/02/17/4c9277be-d59c-11e5-b195-2e29a4e13425_story.html; and Nick Visser, “Trump Amps Up His Call For Torture: ‘We’re Going To Have To Do Things That Are Unthinkable,’” *The Huffington Post*, June 30, 2016, accessed October 18, 2017, available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-torture-waterboarding_us_5775d740e4b04164640f6597. On “taking out” the families of terrorists, see Tom LoBianco, “Donald Trump on terrorists: ‘Take out their families,’” CNN Politics, December 3, 2015, accessed October 18, 2017, available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/02/politics/donald-trump-terrorists-families/>. On taking Iraqi oil, see Claire Phipps, “‘Putin’s Been a Leader’: Key Quotes from Trump and Clinton’s Foreign Policy Forum,” *The Guardian*, September 8, 2016, accessed October 18, 2017, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/08/trump-clinton-foreign-policy-forum-key-quotes>; and “Full Text: Donald Trump’s Speech on Fighting Terrorism,” August 15, 2016, accessed October 18, 2017, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/08/trump-clinton-foreign-policy-forum-key-quotes>.

⁴ See Mark Landler, “How Hillary Became a Hawk,” *New York Times*, April 21, 2016, accessed October 1, 2017, available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/24/magazine/how-hillary-clinton-became-a-hawk.html?_r=0; and Micah Zenko, “Hillary the Hawk: A History,” *Foreign Policy*, July 26, 2016, accessed October 1, 2017, available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/27/hillary-the-hawk-a-history-clinton-2016-military-intervention-libya-iraq-syria/>.

⁵ George Washington, “Farewell Address” (1796), accessed January 6, 2017, available at: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp; Thomas Jefferson, “First Inaugural Address,” March 4, 1801, accessed January 6, 2017, available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jefinau1.asp; and John Quincy Adams, “An Address Delivered at the Request of a Committee of the Citizens of Washington,” July 4, 1821, accessed January 6, 2017, available online at: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/speech-on-independence-day/>.

As a matter of policy, libertarians generally believe the United States should undertake a political and military retrenchment.⁶ Libertarians think that by pulling back from overseas commitments and forgoing intervention in the internal affairs of other countries, the United States would become involved in fewer wars.⁷ War is inherently destructive to human life and property, and disruptive to peaceful exchange and cooperation. It infringes on the rights of individuals abroad. At home, war poses a threat to a free society. The size of the state increases during wartime, as does its propensity to act oppressively. Yet despite Trump's professed militarism, some libertarians saw the type of disengagement they had long sought in his America First platform.

Even if Trump had been the type of non-interventionist some mistakenly believed he was, retrenchment may not produce the free society at home that libertarians desire. Remaining aloof from international politics risks the return of a more competitive and war-prone international system. On close examination, the benefits of retrenchment do not outweigh the risks of a more conflict-ridden world. If peace is a prerequisite of a free society, then a free society is more likely if the United States remains engaged in the world.

This paper argues that a grand strategy of engagement serves libertarian foreign policy ends better than retrenchment.⁸ At the same time, libertarians should continue pursuing reforms that inhibit American leaders' tendency to use military force recklessly. The paper proceeds in four parts. The first part discusses the relationship between international order and a free society before explaining how a grand strategy of engagement helps enable an international environment conducive to the latter. The second part discusses the strongest argument libertarian foreign policy analysts have made for retrenchment: a

⁶ The discussion below focuses on work by scholars centered at the Cato Institute because they have provided the most intellectually coherent and rigorous case for retrenchment. However, while different terminology and justifications are employed, a broad swath of libertarian discourse on foreign policy focuses on the two primary elements of retrenchment: non-interventionism and non-entanglement. For example, former Republican Congressman Ron Paul has regularly claimed the United States needs to "give up its empire" and has specifically argued that exiting its alliance commitments is part of that. For a recent example, see Ron Paul, "A Green Light for American Empire," The Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity, March 14, 2015, accessed November 8, 2017, available at: <http://www.ronpaulinstitute.org/archives/featured-articles/2015/march/14/a-green-light-for-the-american-empire/>. For Paul's thoughts on alliances, see Ron Paul, "Stay Out of Entangling Alliances: Ron Paul's Final Word," *Ron Paul Liberty Report*, August 26, 2017, accessed November 8, 2017, available at: <http://www.ronpaullibertyreport.com/archives/stay-out-of-entangling-alliances-ron-pauls-final-word>. For comments specific to U.S. participation in NATO, see Ron Paul, "NATO is Not a Friend of Peace," *Ron Paul Liberty Report*, July 5, 2017, accessed November 8, 2017, available at: <http://www.ronpaullibertyreport.com/archives/ron-paul-nato-is-not-a-friend-of-peace>; and "Ron Paul's Libertarian Message Attracts Supporters," NPR's All Things Considered, July 25, 2017, accessed November 8, 2017, available at: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12224561>.

⁷ For a concise overview of why libertarians oppose war, see Jason Kuznicki, "Three Arguments Against War," *Libertarianism.org*, December 22, 2014, accessed November 7, 2017, available at: <https://www.libertarianism.org/columns/three-arguments-against-war>.

⁸ "Retrenchment" and "engagement" are generic labels used here for the sake of simplicity. The ongoing debate on American grand strategy features an increasing number of labels for potential grand strategies. One recent work cited fourteen different names for proposals for a new American grand strategy. Despite the binary presented here, the United States actually has a range of grand strategic options. Retrenchment and engagement are both nearer to the middle of this range, with pure isolationism and global hegemony at the extremes. For the proliferation of proposed labels for a new grand strategy, see Paul D. Miller, *American Power & Liberal Order: A Conservative Internationalist Grand Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016), xi. For the best discussion of the range of America's post-Cold War grand strategic options, see Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy." *International Security* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996-1997): 5-53.

grand strategy derived from realist international relations known as “restraint.” The third part explains why the benefits of retrenchment are marginal while the risks are high by exploring alternative scenarios that could occur if the United States retrenches. The fourth part explores the policy implications of a grand strategy of engagement for libertarians.

Engagement and a Free Society

Foreign policy presents a dilemma for libertarians. In modern history, the state has been the primary actor in international politics. Libertarians are suspicious of an overweening state because it poses a threat to a free society. Libertarians therefore adopt an *a priori* non-interventionist position according to which the use of military force should be prohibited except in cases of national self-defense. This section explains why this focus on narrow self-defense is misguided. First, it explores the relationship between the international order and a state’s political order. Second, it discusses the concept of grand strategy and how a grand strategy of engagement through a system of alliances facilitates an international order conducive to a free society.

International Politics and a Free Society

If the United States adopted a narrow focus on its self-defense, it likely would remain physically secure. Given its geographic isolation, America is largely immune to major military threats. Therefore, if the United States focuses narrowly on its own security, it will have few reasons to go to war. Retrenchment might therefore allow the United States to remain aloof from international politics and forgo alliances, obviating the need to maintain a large military and thereby avoiding the taxation, bureaucracy, and state growth that accompany large military establishments. However, a libertarian foreign policy narrowly focused on territorial defense is misguided for at least two reasons. First, “security” is an ambiguous, and often subjective, basis for determining America’s national interest. Second, a narrow focus on physical security ignores the way an increasingly competitive international system might affect the internal character of the American state.

The physical security of a state is obviously necessary, but it is an insufficient basis for identifying the national interest because security is an inherently ambiguous concept. References to national security, as political scientist Arnold Wolfers argued in 1952, are rhetorically powerful but have little intrinsic meaning.⁹ The invocation of national security is just as symbolic when it’s used to sell retrenchment as it is when inflating threats for the purpose of hawkish policies.

A state defines its security based on its interests, and its interests are a product of its values. Historian Melvyn Leffler, in the course of developing an explanatory framework for studying the history of

⁹ Arnold Wolfers, "'National Security' as an Ambiguous Symbol," *Political Science Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (1952): 481-502. On this point, see also Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 11.

American foreign relations, has argued that America's national interest must be viewed through its "core values." Instead of focusing on narrow self-defense, Leffler argues, "Core values usually fuse material self-interest with more fundamental goals like the defense of a state's organizing ideology, such as liberal capitalism, the protection of its political institutions, and the safeguarding of its physical base or territorial integrity."¹⁰ Leffler later warned that throughout American history, imbalances between ideology and a rational understanding of America's national interest have led to foreign policy disasters. Too much of the latter leads to heightened threat perceptions, which have in turn resulted in the misuse of American power abroad.¹¹ However, he rightly notes that narrow physical security, the internal political character, and ideological concerns are inextricably tied together when considering America's interests.

If America's values include, for libertarians, the maintenance of a free society, then it is important to consider how the external environment of a state affects its internal character. International pressures help shape the internal character of states.¹² The two are, in fact, intertwined. International order and domestic political order both serve the purpose of providing security against organized violence.¹³ How that order is achieved on both the international and domestic levels has important implications for both the likelihood of war and the internal character of a state.

Liberal polities in particular have been interested in the connection between international order and domestic political order. Political scientist Daniel Deudney argues that liberal states attempt to shape their international environment to mitigate anarchy at the international level. To do so, liberal states practice what Deudney refers to as "security co-binding." Security co-binding is an effort to lock states into mutually constraining institutions to mitigate the threat they pose to one another in an anarchic international system.¹⁴

In the absence of these institutions, states are likely to balance against the potential threats they pose to one another by building up their military capabilities. The result of these military buildups would be rampant security dilemmas. Security dilemmas occur when defensive measures in one state create a sense of insecurity in another, producing a response that reduces the security of the first state, leading to further defensive measures, and so on.¹⁵ Security dilemmas tend to produce arms races and

¹⁰ Melvyn P. Leffler, "National Security," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, edited by Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 126.

¹¹ Melvyn P. Leffler, "9/11 and American Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 3 (2005): 395-413.

¹² For a seminal work, see Peter Gourevitch, "The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics," *International Organization* 32, no. 4 (1978): 881-912.

¹³ For an in-depth discussion of the relationship of domestic and international orders as a means to combat organized violence, see R. Harrison Wagner, *War and the State: The Theory of International Politics*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order." *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 182.

¹⁵ John Herz first coined the term "security dilemma." See John H. Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 2, no. 2 (1950): 157-80. Cited in William C. Wohlforth, "Realism," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, edited by Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal, 131-149 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 142.

occasionally spiral into war.¹⁶ In modern Europe, wars that resulted from these security dilemmas led to recurring cycles of state building.¹⁷

While libertarians are fond of quoting George Washington's Farewell Address for warning against foreign entanglements, his endorsement of a system of co-binding among the newly independent American states is less well recognized. Arguing in favor of the union created by the Constitution, Washington highlighted how it helped avoid the inter-state competition that would lead to centralized, militarized states inimical to republican freedom:

While, then, every part of our country thus feels an immediate and particular interest in union, all parts combined cannot fail to find in the united mass of means and efforts greater strength, greater resource, proportionably greater security from external danger, a less frequent interruption of their peace by foreign nations; and, what is of inestimable value, they must derive from union an exemption from those broils and war between themselves, which so frequently afflict neighboring countries not tied together by the same governments, which their own rival ships alone would be sufficient to produce, but which opposite foreign alliances, attachments, and intrigues, would stimulate and embitter. Hence, likewise, they will avoid the necessity of those overgrown military establishments which, under any form of government, are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to republican liberty. In this sense it is that your union ought to be considered as a main prop of your liberty, and that the love of the one ought to endear to you the preservation of the other.¹⁸

In the absence of union under the Constitution, political and economic competition between the states might have led to military competition destructive to a free society. Just as non-entanglement was instrumental to avoiding involvement in the balance of power politics of Europe, political union was instrumental to avoiding their recreation in North America.¹⁹

American political and military engagement with the world's major powers through multilateral institutions fulfills a similar function today. Extending security guarantees to states such as Germany, France, the United Kingdom, South Korea, and Japan co-binds their security.²⁰ In the process it mitigates the anarchic nature of international politics, facilitating peaceful cooperation and reducing the chances they will go to war with one another. By reducing the chances of major war, American alliances help mitigate hierarchy at home and the threat it poses to a free society.

¹⁶ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 167-214.

¹⁷ See Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 67-95.

¹⁸ George Washington, "Farewell Address" (1796), accessed January 6, 2017, available at: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp.

¹⁹ The author thanks Edward Rhodes for this insight.

²⁰ Deudney and Ikenberry, "The Nature and Sources of the Liberal International Order," 182-184.

American Engagement and Liberal International Order

Examining U.S. foreign policy as a whole is too complex for a single paper, so the focus here is on an aspect of foreign policy known as grand strategy. Foreign policy and grand strategy are related concepts, but the distinction between the two is important. This section begins by attempting to define grand strategy and explaining why it matters for libertarian foreign policy. It then explains how a grand strategy of engagement facilitates the type of international order conducive to a free society.

Grand strategy is a difficult concept to define. Scholars who write about the subject often define it in ways that are convenient to their own purposes.²¹ Broadly speaking though, a state's foreign policy indicates its goals in international affairs. However, its grand strategy is best understood as a conceptual framework for linking various instruments of national power in pursuit of those goals.²² A state's grand strategy can help shape its external environment and has important implications for its domestic character.²³

Of the instruments of national power available for the pursuit of foreign policy goals, military power is of particular importance. As political scientist Barry Posen has explained, in international politics, military threats are the most dangerous and the military means to protect against them are the most costly.²⁴ Emphasizing military power in this analysis is also important for reasons specific to libertarians. The financial burden of a state's military is borne by individual citizens from whom taxes are extracted. Throughout history, militaries have also been used as tools of repression. While history demonstrates that military power can be instrumental to a free society by deterring conflicts or emancipating oppressed populations, it is a blunt instrument.²⁵ Its misuse leads to destruction and inevitably to the loss of innocent lives.

How military power is used and for what purpose therefore matters immensely for the type of grand strategy libertarians should support. In a grand strategy that can be described broadly as "engagement," the primary purpose of American military power is to co-bind the security of friendly powers in key regions of the world through a system of military alliances. These alliances with many of the world's

²¹ For an intellectual history of grand strategy that highlights this point, see Lukas Milevski, *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²² For example, Historian Hal Brands defines grand strategy as the "intellectual architecture that lends structure to foreign policy; it is the logic that helps states navigate a complex and dangerous world." See Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 1. Similarly, political scientist Colin Dueck states, "Grand strategy involves the prioritization of foreign policy goals, the identification of existing and potential resources, and the selection of a plan or road map that uses those resources to meet those goals." See Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1.

²³ See Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), 233; and Robert J. Art, "The United States, the Balance of Power, and World War II: Was Spykman Right?" *Security Studies* 14, no. 3 (July-September 2005): 365-406.

²⁴ Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2014), 1.

²⁵ Christopher Preble, "Libertarians and Foreign Policy: The Individual, the State, and War," *The Independent Review* 21, no. 2 (2016): 173-174.

major powers have been a core feature of America's grand strategy since the end of World War II.²⁶ By forming such alliances, the United States has helped underpin a liberal international order. This order consists of a web of legal, political, economic, and security institutions that facilitate cooperation among states, develop patterns of expected outcomes, and generally speaking, provide the rules that govern the international system.²⁷ These institutions help reduce competitive pressures in international politics, facilitating a more peaceful and stable international order in the process, and thus an international environment more conducive to a free society.

Political scientists Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth identify three interrelated functions that U.S. military power serves in underpinning this order and providing benefits from a libertarian perspective.²⁸ First, U.S. military power helps deter threats against the United States and its allies. Second, it reassures allies so they do not arm themselves, either conventionally or with nuclear weapons. Third, it provides incentives for cooperation by reducing competitive pressures among many of the world's major powers.

The first function of U.S. military power in a grand strategy of engagement is to deter aggression against itself and its allies.²⁹ The key to this deterrent effect is the local balance of military forces.³⁰ Forward-deployed troops enhance deterrence because they are difficult to remove in a crisis and they raise the expected costs of invasion by credibly threatening serious physical damage to aggressors, even when they're incapable of defeating the invading forces.³¹ The latent military power of the United States—the potential to convert its economic strength into military force—is a far less potent deterrent. It cannot be immediately brought to bear, and it is extremely difficult and costly—militarily, economically, and politically—to reverse territorial conquest by an aggressive power. Superior economic strength that may or may not be converted into military force therefore does not pose a credible threat to would-be aggressors.³²

Deterrence facilitates a second function of U.S. military power in a grand strategy of engagement. American security guarantees create a sense of assured protection for U.S. allies that alleviate the need

²⁶ On America's postwar grand strategy, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992); and G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

²⁷ For an overview, see Hans Kundnani, "What Is the Liberal International Order?" Policy Brief no. 17 (Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2017), available at <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/what-liberal-international-order>; and Hal Brands, "American Grand Strategy and the Liberal Order: Continuity, Change, and Options for the Future" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016): 2-4, available at: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE209.html>.

²⁸ Brooks and Wohlforth actually refer to this strategy as "deep engagement." See Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1. Critics of deep engagement often conflate with strategies known as "primacy" and "liberal hegemony." However, these strategies are actually synonymous with a separate grand strategy the authors refer to as "deep engagement plus." See Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, 82.

²⁹ Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, 104-105

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

³¹ Michael Allen Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, "Landpower and American Credibility," *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2015-2016): 17-26.

³² Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, 105.

for them to balance against one another.³³ By mitigating the need for regional states to provide for their own security, these alliances help prevent security dilemmas. These security dilemmas can lead to destabilizing conventional arms races and provide incentives for the further spread of nuclear weapons. They can also spiral into wars.³⁴ States occupying contiguous territory are especially likely to be suspicious of nearby states arming themselves due to uncertainty over the real purpose of a defensive military buildup. As Brooks and Wohlforth explain, the United States is therefore well positioned to export security to its allies in Eurasia because its distant geography makes it more difficult to project power and therefore less likely to pursue territorial conquests of its own.³⁵

The dynamics of deterrence and assurance also serve a third purpose by creating incentives for U.S. allies to engage in multilateral cooperation. Brooks and Wohlforth present a probabilistic argument about the way engagement by a powerful state like the United States increases the likelihood that states will cooperate with one another.³⁶ Drawing on political scientist Robert Gilpin's insight that states tend to shift to non-security priorities when prospects for war are low, they argue that cooperative outcomes are more likely when a security guarantor is present to reduce the likelihood of security dilemmas.³⁷ The provision of security guarantees by the United States, in effect, creates a virtuous circle. States, with their security assured, are more likely to pursue multilateral cooperation on a range of military and non-military issues.³⁸ While American military power alone is insufficient to produce these cooperative outcomes, the United States can help increase the chances of cooperation through its role as security guarantor.³⁹

Two important caveats to this argument must be acknowledged though. First, not all allies are created equal. The United States has partnered with more than its fair share of unsavory and authoritarian regimes throughout the past seven decades.⁴⁰ While sometimes circumstances—such as the Cold War—necessitated these arrangements, these partnerships often sully America's image abroad and undermine its leadership of a liberal international order.

Second, the increased number of security guarantees the United States has extended since the end of the Cold War could be counterproductive in two ways. For one, extending even defensive military

³³ See Charles L. Glaser and Andrew H. Kydd in "Correspondence: Can Great Powers Discern Intentions?" *International Security*, vol. 40 no. 3 (2015): 197-198.

³⁴ Assurance addresses the "security model" of nuclear proliferation. There are also domestic political and normative reasons why states do or do not pursue nuclear weapons. See Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?: Three Models in Search of a Bomb." *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996-1997): 54-86.

³⁵ Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, 99. The authors derive this insight from John Mearsheimer's argument about the "stopping power of water." See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (New York: Norton, 2001), 44.

³⁶ See Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, 156-161. For a rebuttal to the deterministic version of this argument, see Christopher J. Fettweis, "Unipolarity, Hegemony, and the New Peace," *Security Studies* 26, no. 3 (2017): 423-51.

³⁷ From Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Cited in William C. Wohlforth, "Gilpinian Realism and International Relations," *International Relations* 25, no. 4 (2011): 503-504.

³⁸ Marina E. Henke, "The Politics of Diplomacy: How the United States Builds Multilateral Military Coalitions," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2017): 410-24.

³⁹ Daniel W. Drezner, "Military Primacy Doesn't Pay (Nearly as Much as You Think)." *International Security* 38, no. 1 (2013): 70-74. Drezner cites alliances and protection of shipping lanes as the key public goods the U.S. provides as security guarantor.

⁴⁰ See Ted Galen Carpenter and Malou Innocent, *Perilous Partners: The Benefits and Pitfalls of America's Alliances with Authoritarian Regimes* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2015).

alliances could exacerbate security dilemmas with those who are not party to them. For example, a number of analysts have suggested that the post-Cold War expansion of NATO into former Warsaw Pact countries and Soviet Republics exacerbated Russian insecurity and helps explain its aggression against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine more recently.⁴¹ And two, the United States can undermine its role in underpinning a liberal international by overextending itself and diminishing both its military and economic power.⁴²

In light of these caveats, it is worth considering reforms to America's current alliance system. Partnerships with authoritarian regimes can and should be reconsidered. Moreover, the extension of further security guarantees—particularly in Russia's periphery—should be halted.⁴³ While America's alliances proved beneficial in many ways, they should not be viewed as an unalloyed good. The likelihood that there are diminishing returns to extending security guarantees in perpetuity is worth exploring further.

Taken as a whole though, a grand strategy of American engagement has had a positive effect on the international system. The post-World War II order the United States helped build—and which its provision of security guarantees helps underpin—has reduced security competition among many of the world's leading powers. The reduction in security competition has increased incentives for positive-sum economic and political cooperation among former rivals. Reduced competition and increased cooperation have helped facilitate an international order that is less prone to war and thus more conducive to a free society.

Realism, Retrenchment, and Libertarian Foreign Policy

Despite the benefits discussed above, libertarian assessments of U.S. foreign policy are generally negative. Even widely divergent groups of libertarians agree that American engagement in international politics is too costly, leads to the loss of innocent life abroad, and enables an oppressive state at home. Libertarians, for the most part, want the United States to exit its alliances and bring its forward deployed military forces home. Broadly speaking, they want the United States to undertake a political-military retrenchment. This section explores the strongest argument libertarian foreign policy scholars have provided to justify retrenchment: a grand strategy known as "restraint."

⁴¹ See John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014): 77-89; and Joshua Shiffrin, "Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (2016): 7-44.

⁴² Drezner, "Military Primacy Doesn't Pay," 70-72.

⁴³ For a brief discussion of the problem of continued expansion into Russia's periphery, see Ben Denison and Matthew Fay, "Much Ado About Montenegro," *War on the Rocks*, April 27, 2017, accessed October 19, 2017, available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/much-ado-about-montenegro/>.

Realism and American Grand Strategy

Restraint is a grand strategy derived from realist international relations theory. The foreign policy goal at the heart of this strategy is the physical security of the United States and its power position in the international system. Barry Posen, a leading realist scholar and the foremost proponent of restraint, has laid out in intricate detail the strategy's logic and meticulously describes the type of military force structure necessary to pursue it.⁴⁴ In explaining the purpose of this enterprise, Posen wrote, "The explicit purpose of this book is to develop a grand strategy based on a strictly construed assessment of U.S. security interests, or what once might have been termed 'vital interests.' These interests are the minimization of threats to U.S. sovereignty, safety, territorial integrity, and the power position necessary to ensure against those threats."⁴⁵

Realism, as a school of thought in the study of international relations, focuses on power politics between states.⁴⁶ Realism assumes the international system is a Hobbesian state of nature.⁴⁷ It assumes people form themselves into political groups. States are the most important political group in international politics.⁴⁸ Nationalism serves as a form of in-group cohesion within the state, and states act in their own self-interest.⁴⁹ Security is a state's highest priority because no one actor has a monopoly on the legitimate use of force in international politics. The distribution of military capabilities among the actors in the anarchic system determines its structure and the relative security of each state.⁵⁰ To achieve security, states will attempt to counteract or "balance" against threats by either building up their own military capabilities ("internal balancing") or making alliances with other states to combine their military capabilities ("external balancing").⁵¹

Some theories within the realist school of thought do take into account domestic factors, but realism is by and large indifferent to the internal characteristics states.⁵² States are undifferentiated units for realists, each pursuing its self-interest. Generally speaking, realism considers states "security seekers," with the state's national interest defined by the pursuit of state power for the purpose of security.⁵³ Posen's definition of grand strategy, which is widely cited by proponents of grand strategic restraint, is

⁴⁴ Posen, *Restraint*. A number of other scholars have made this argument as well, though. For examples, see Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security* 21, no. 4 (Spring 1997): 5-48; Christopher A. Preble, *The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); and Harvey M. Sapolsky, Benjamin H. Friedman, Eugene Gholz, and Daryl G. Press, "Restraining Order: For Strategic Modesty," *World Affairs* 172, no. 2 (2009): 84-94.

⁴⁵ Barry R. Posen, "Author's Response" in H-Diplo International Security Studies Forum Roundtable 8-16 on *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*, July 11, 2016, accessed October 17, 2016, available at https://issforum.org/roundtables/8-16-restraint#_Toc455908560.

⁴⁶ For an overview, see Wohlforth, "Realism," 131-149.

⁴⁷ See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by Richard Tuck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xxx.

⁴⁸ Wohlforth, "Realism," 133.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston, Mass.: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 97-99.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁵² The variant of realism that best incorporates domestic factors is known as "neoclassical realism," see Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144-72.

⁵³ Marc Trachtenberg, "The Question of Realism: A Historian's View," *Security Studies* 13, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 156-161.

emblematic of this assumption.⁵⁴ “A grand strategy,” he argues, “is a nation-state’s theory about how to produce security for itself.”⁵⁵

Given America’s relative security, realism suggests that to “produce security for itself,” the United States is best served by acting as an “offshore balancer.” Realists differ over the relative importance of various regions to American security, or whether the protection of commercial shipping is vital to the security and economic health of the United States.⁵⁶ However, historically, they generally agree that the only major military threat to the United States would be a state that could gain hegemony over Eurasia or one of its key regions. Should such a threat emerge, an offshore balancer would allow regional states to balance against the hegemonic threat—supplying them with the means to do so if necessary.⁵⁷ Only when frontline states cannot successfully contain or defeat the emerging threat should the United States draw on its latent military power and commit its own forces to the fight. Realist international relations scholar John Mearsheimer argues that American strategy during World War II was an example of offshore balancing: The United States supplied Great Britain with the means to balance against Nazi Germany’s bid for hegemony over Europe before ultimately entering the conflict itself to defeat the German threat militarily.⁵⁸

Based on realist theory, Posen critiques what he calls “liberal hegemony”—which is his term for America’s current grand strategy. Liberal hegemony is a combination of several schools of international relations thought.⁵⁹ According to Posen, it is the “consensus grand strategy” America adopted after World War II. It is “hegemonic,” he writes, “because it builds on the great power advantage of the United States relative to all other major powers and intends to preserve as much of that power as possible.”⁶⁰ The United States invests heavily in its military to preserve this great power advantage. In doing so, it hopes to dissuade others from competing against, let alone, fighting it. American grand strategy is liberal, Posen argues, because it “aims to defend and promote a range of values associated

⁵⁴ For examples, see Harvey M. Sapolsky, Eugene Gholz, and Caitlin Talmadge, *U.S. Defense Politics: The Origins of Security Policy* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 13; and Benjamin H. Friedman, and Justin Logan, “Why Washington Doesn’t Debate Grand Strategy,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 17.

⁵⁵ Posen, *Restraint*, 1. See also Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 25.

⁵⁶ For example, many realist scholars suggest the United States needs to take a more active role balancing against the rise of China. Libertarians borrowing from realist principles, however, argue that America’s regional allies should bear most of this burden. See Justin Logan, “China, America, and the Pivot to Asia,” Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 717 (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, January 8, 2013). Some realists say the flow of Middle Eastern oil is important because it helps maintain the economic basis of American power and therefore a regional hegemon could threaten America’s vital interests. Realist scholars Eugene Gholz and Daryl Press instead argue that an “over-the-horizon” military presence is all that’s necessary to defend against significant disruptions to the flow of oil. See Eugene Gholz and Daryl G. Press, “Protecting ‘the Prize’: Oil and the U.S. National Interest,” *Security Studies* 19, no. 3 (2010): 453-85.

⁵⁷ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 42. See also, Christopher Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balance: America’s Future Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 22, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 86-124.

⁵⁸ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 42.

⁵⁹ Liberal hegemony is often used interchangeably with a strategy known as “primacy.” It is also often conflated with Brooks and Wohlforth’s strategy of “deep engagement.” See Benjamin H. Friedman and Justin Logan, “Why Washington Doesn’t Debate Grand Strategy,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 25. Brooks and Wohlforth, however, argue that interventions to spread liberal democracy are part of a distinct grand strategy they call “deep engagement-plus,” which is more or less synonymous with liberal hegemony. See Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, 7-8 & 191.

⁶⁰ Posen, *Restraint*, 5-6.

with Western society in general and the United States in particular”—namely, liberal democracy and free markets—as a means to further its security.⁶¹ Liberal hegemony recommends that the United States use military force under a variety of circumstances. Under liberal hegemony, as Posen describes it, U.S. military power may be used to enforce international norms, to depose dictatorial regimes, or to install liberal democratic governments.

Posen’s strategy, on the other hand, recommends a far more limited range of scenarios under which the United States should use its military power. Posen suggests that, in the absence of major military threats, U.S. military strategy should focus on maintaining “command of the commons”—the ability to deny another state control of the global sea, air, space, or cyber domains if necessary.⁶² In doing so, he recommends the United States do away with the majority of its alliance commitments.⁶³ By focusing on maintaining command of the commons, rather than defending allies in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the United States can adopt a smaller, maritime-oriented military force structure.⁶⁴ Only if frontline states fail to balance against a potential hegemon would the United States need to increase the size of its military to act as an offshore balancer.

Given its inherent security, the United States would not need to maintain the system of military alliances it developed after World War II under restraint. For realists, alliances are additive. They form so states can externally balance—that is, combine their military capabilities—against common threats. As realist scholar Stephen Walt argued, “states join alliances to protect themselves from states or coalitions whose superior resources could pose a threat.”⁶⁵ The primary reason to do so is to ensure the state’s survival. In the absence of such a threat, alliances are unnecessary.

Libertarians, Realists, and Retrenchment

While few libertarians are realists, and fewer realists are libertarians, they share a common interest in retrenchment. Therefore, libertarian foreign policy scholars have adopted variants of restraint as their preferred grand strategy.⁶⁶ They argue that the United States should focus narrowly on its own security. By doing so, they assume that the United States would reduce the chances it goes to war—allowing it to decrease the size of its military and the state that supports it.

For libertarians, the virtue of realism, and a grand strategy derived from it, is that it sets a high bar of justification for going to war and suggests the United States does not need allies to be secure. According to realism, only major military threats to the physical security of the American state or its vital interests require the use of American military power. The United States, secure as it is given its two oceanic

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 136-144.

⁶³ Ibid., 87-120.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 145-161.

⁶⁵ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 17-21.

⁶⁶ See Benjamin H. Friedman and Christopher A. Preble, "Budgetary Savings from Military Restraint," Policy Analysis no. 667 (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2010).

moats, weak friendly neighbors, and retaliatory nuclear arsenal, should rarely need to go to war. Realists understand that force is necessary in international affairs, but they are skeptical of its efficacy in promoting liberal values in foreign countries. Utopian schemes to remake the world do not provide a compelling reason to use military force for realists. For libertarians, because the size and power of the state consistently increases a result of war, raising a high bar for the use of military force by the United States should slow the growth of the American state and thus prove beneficial for a free society. Having fewer peacetime alliance commitments would also allow the United States to reduce the size of its military, and the state that supports it—thus reducing the financial burden it places on American taxpayers.

There are important differences between academic realists and libertarians when discussing why the United States should adopt restraint as its grand strategy. Whereas some realists believe the United States should take a more restrained role in international politics because other states will inevitably counterbalance against American power, or because America's current military commitments will inevitably become financially unsustainable, libertarians tend to justify retrenchment in normative terms.⁶⁷ Libertarian "retrenchers" generally accept that engagement is financially sustainable.⁶⁸ They instead argue that extending security guarantees to ameliorate security competition is unnecessary because modern war is counterproductive for states economically, while at the same time norms have developed against military aggression.⁶⁹ Instead of needing to pull back from its preeminent role in international politics, as some realists suggest, libertarians argue that the United States should do so because that role is financially costly, threatening to a free society, and unnecessary for American security, narrowly defined.

It is understandable why libertarians would find a grand strategy narrowly focused on threats to its physical security appealing. Time and again, American policymakers have justified unnecessary and destructive wars with talk of falling "dominoes" in Southeast Asia or mushroom-cloud-shaped "smoking guns." Because the United States is largely immune to major military threats, libertarians suggest America's role as a security guarantor is a costly burden rather than a necessity—possibly drawing the

⁶⁷ When a great power's international ambitions are undermined by the financial burdens necessary to achieve them, it is referred to as "imperial overstretch." For the classic historical treatment of this argument, see Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). For a more recent argument that American grand strategy is unsustainable due to its financial burden, see Christopher Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2012): 203-13. For a critique of these arguments, see Thomas H. Oatley, *A Political Economy of American Hegemony: Buildups, Booms, and Busts* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 158-159.

⁶⁸ Justin Logan and Benjamin H. Friedman, "Why the U.S. Military Budget Is 'Foolish and Sustainable'," *Orbis* 56, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 177-91.

⁶⁹ On the decline of interstate war, see Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011); and Bruno Tertrais, "The Demise of Ares: The End of War as We Know It?" *The Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2012): 7-22. The empirical basis for this argument has been challenged in recent years though. See Bear Braumoeller, "Is War Disappearing?" (August 27, 2013), presented at the American Political Science Association Chicago 2013 Meeting, available through the Social Science Research Network: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2317269> (cited with the author's permission); and Tanisha M. Fazal, "Dead Wrong?: Battle Deaths, Military Medicine, and Exaggerated Reports of War's Demise," *International Security* 39, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 95-125. On the financial sustainability of America's current grand strategy, see Justin Logan and Benjamin H. Friedman, "Why the U.S. Military Budget Is 'Foolish and Sustainable'," *Orbis* 56, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 177-91.

United States into conflicts the American people neither want nor need.⁷⁰ Similarly, they suggest, the forward-deployed military forces needed to make those security guarantees credible are unnecessary and provide American policymakers the means to militarily intervene to spread liberal democracy or for reasons otherwise unrelated to the physical security of the United States.⁷¹

Reasons for Retrenchment

Based on the assumption that the United States should focus narrowly on its own security, libertarians make four assumptions about the consequences of retrenchment for international and domestic politics. First, they assume that the positive developments in international politics since 1945 would continue after the United States rescinds its security guarantees. Second, they assume that even if international politics becomes more competitive and conflict-prone, that development would have little effect on the United States. Third, they assume that retrenchment would reduce the chances the United States will go to war. Fourth, they assume that retrenchment would provide significant positive developments for a free society.

The first assumption underpinning the argument for retrenchment is that the world would remain peaceful and cooperative even if the United States exits its alliances. Libertarians assume that the positive developments in international politics after World War II—decreased interstate war and increased economic interdependence—occurred independent of America’s role as a security guarantor. Instead, norms developed in international politics against military aggression. Military victory is no longer seen as a matter of national glory, nor is aggression economically profitable.⁷² Similarly, they argue that increased economic interdependence is sufficiently robust that states responsible for their own security would continue to trade with one another and the world would continue to enjoy pacifying effects of positive-sum economic exchange.⁷³

Based on this assumption, retrenchers predict few changes in international politics in the absence of American security guarantees, while those changes that do occur would be mostly positive. Former allies, who now free ride on the U.S. defense budget at the expense of American taxpayers, would simply increase their defense budgets in line with their defense needs.⁷⁴ If threats to those states

⁷⁰ Many libertarians argue that America's alliance commitments are dangerous relics of the Cold War but acknowledge that they served a purpose while the Soviet Union existed. However, even as the Cold War was heating back up in 1980, former Cato Institute scholar Earl Ravenal referred to America's alliances as "transmission belts for war." See Earl C. Ravenal, "Can Non-Intervention Survive Afghanistan," Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 3 (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, June 1, 1980), 2-3.

⁷¹ Preble, *The Power Problem*, 87-115.

⁷² John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 20-25 and 220-223.

⁷³ John Glaser, "Withdrawing from Overseas Bases: Why a Forward-Deployed Military Posture is Unnecessary, Outdated, and Dangerous," Policy Analysis no. 816 (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, July 18, 2017), 6.

⁷⁴ On the free-rider problem in America’s alliances see Mancur Olson, Jr. and Richard Zeckhauser, "An Economic Theory of Alliances," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 48, no. 3 (1966): 266-79. For examples of the libertarian views on this problem, see Christopher Preble, "Our Freeloading Allies," Cato Institute, Cato at Liberty blog, May 29, 2014, accessed October 17, 2017, available at <https://www.cato.org/blog/freeriders>; and "U.S. Taxpayer Subsidies for European Welfare States Continue," Cato Institute, Cato at Liberty blog, June 16, 2015, accessed October 17, 2017, available at: <https://www.cato.org/blog/us-taxpayer-subsidies-european-welfare-states-continue>. However, Posen argues that the term "cheap-riding" is more appropriate for describing America’s allies’ behavior. See Posen, *Restraint*, 35-44.

emerge, they would therefore be better prepared to confront them. Some former allies might also pursue nuclear weapons to balance against threats, but libertarian retrenchers suggest that nuclear proliferation is not as problematic as frequently assumed. In line with realist thinking on the subject, they argue that the spread of nuclear weapons is not necessarily a problem because states will adopt retaliatory nuclear postures and deter one another from going to war.⁷⁵

Second, libertarian retrenchers assume that, even if the world did become more competitive and conflict-prone, it need not affect the United States absent the emergence of a major military threat. Three arguments are deployed based on this assumption. First, they argue, the U.S. government is responsible solely for the security and safety of the American people; therefore, wars elsewhere should not be a matter of concern to U.S. foreign policy unless they directly threaten the security of the United States.⁷⁶ Second, the United States will not suffer economically due to foreign conflicts because, as a neutral third party, it can continue to trade with the combatants. According to political scientists Eugene Gholz and Daryl Press, the United States can even profit from these wars economically because belligerents will need to acquire goods from somewhere.⁷⁷ Third, retrenchers argue that it is not inevitable that the United States will be dragged into a war in Eurasia. Political scientist Christopher Layne, for example, cites seven major European wars out of ten since the end of the eighteenth century in which the United States did not become involved. Layne argues that there was only one, World War II, in which U.S. military involvement was necessary.⁷⁸

A third, related, assumption of libertarian retrenchers is that the United States would fight fewer wars if it retrenches. They present a number of reasons why the United States would be less likely to use military force. For one, by reducing the size of the military and garrisoning it at home, retrenchers imply that American policymakers would be less tempted to use military force. Two, by jettisoning its alliance commitments, the United States would be less likely to get drawn into a war by its allies. According to Posen, American security guarantees create a moral hazard problem that leads to “reckless driving” by U.S. allies. States, he argues, will act imprudently when their security is guaranteed, undermining American interests abroad and possibly dragging the United States into a war.⁷⁹ Three, because the United States would not have to reassure allies that it will come to their defense, it would not have to use military force to demonstrate that its promise to protect them is credible.⁸⁰ And four, libertarians argue that by retrenching, the United States would not risk provoking hostile powers.⁸¹

⁷⁵ For a realist take on nuclear weapons, see Waltz’s contribution to Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz; *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed; with New Sections on India and Pakistan, Terrorism, and Missile Defense* 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2003). For a libertarian argument applying this logic, see Glaser, “Withdrawing from Overseas Bases,” 4.

⁷⁶ Preble, *The Power Problem*, 129-131. See also Doug Bandow, “Washington’s First Obligation is to Defend America, Not the World,” Cato Institute, Cato at Liberty blog, August 22, 2016, accessed November 7, 2017, available at: <https://www.cato.org/blog/washingtons-first-obligation-defend-america-not-world>.

⁷⁷ Eugene Gholz, and Daryl G. Press; “The Effects of Wars on Neutral Countries: Why It Doesn’t Pay to Preserve the Peace,” *Security Studies* 10, no. 4 (2001): 1-57.

⁷⁸ Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balance: America’s Future Grand Strategy,” 120.

⁷⁹ Posen, *Restraint*, 44-50.

⁸⁰ On the limits of credibility in international relations, see Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Evaluate Military Threats* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

⁸¹ For example, libertarians argue that the insecurity created by the U.S. military’s forward deployment is a key reason why hostile states act aggressively or pursue nuclear weapons. See Glaser, “Withdrawing from Overseas Bases,” 9-10.

Finally, taking all these assumptions into account, libertarian retrenchers assume that adopting their strategy would produce a freer society by reducing the financial burden the U.S. military places on American taxpayers and reducing the size of the state necessary to support it. Retrenchers argue that, because America is secure from major military threat, the United States can reduce the size of its military. The U.S. military is costly because it is designed to project power of transoceanic distances, not to defend the United States. In a 2010 analysis, Christopher Preble and Benjamin Friedman of the Cato Institute estimated that the U.S. military's active-duty end-strength would decrease to around 949,000.⁸²

Based on these reductions, Preble and Friedman have argued that the United States could save around \$1 trillion over a period of ten years if it retrenched militarily.⁸³ Implied in this estimate is that other aspects of the national security state could be reduced or eliminated as well.⁸⁴ For example, the national security apparatus built up to prosecute the war on terror could be reduced because terrorism does not represent a major threat. If a major military threat were to reemerge, retrenchers argue, the United States would quickly regenerate the military capabilities discarded when it retrenched and defeat the threat.⁸⁵

Costs and Benefits in Libertarian Foreign Policy

A number of the arguments libertarians make in favor of retrenchment have merit, but the cost-benefit analysis derived from them is based on a deterministic view of international politics. Libertarian retrenchers assume that international politics would remain more or less the same absent American engagement and that America's domestic politics would remain the same even if the international system become more conflict-prone. Given the inherent uncertainty of forecasting, the costs and benefits of engagement and retrenchment need to be considered in a more probabilistic fashion.⁸⁶ This section begins by exploring a number of scenarios that could occur should the United States adopt a grand strategy of retrenchment. It then reassesses the costs and benefits of retrenchment for a free society.

⁸² This figure is derived from a 2010 recommendation to reduce the end-strength of each U.S. military service by "roughly one third." See Benjamin H. Friedman and Christopher A. Preble, "Budgetary Savings from Military Restraint," Policy Analysis no. 667 (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2010), 6. At the time, the U.S. military's total active-duty end-strength was 1.4 million. Active-duty end-strength today is 1.3 million. See "DoD Personnel, Workforce Reports, and Publications: Military Personnel," Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center, accessed November 8, 2017, available at: https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp.

⁸³ See Friedman and Preble, "Budgetary Savings from Military Restraint." An update to this estimate is available in Benjamin H. Friedman, "Cato: A Strategy of Restraint," in Jacob Cohn, Ryan Boone, and Thomas G. Mahnken, "How Much is Enough?: Alternative Defense Strategies" (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, November 28, 2016), 9-11.

⁸⁴ For example, Friedman and Preble assume the size of the American intelligence community will be reduced because retrenchment will require it to focus on fewer threats. See Friedman and Preble, "Budgetary Savings from Military Restraint," 2 & 7.

⁸⁵ Will Ruger, "The Case for Realism and Restraint," *Reason* 46, no. 8 (January 2015): 30.

⁸⁶ Philip E. Tetlock and Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction*, First edition (New York: Crown Publishers, 2015), 247-249.

The Ceteris Paribus Assumption in Libertarian Foreign Policy

In a system with more independent states balancing against one another, is war more or less likely? Libertarians are placing a bet that all else would remain equal in international politics if the United States retrenches. While they assume a world where an increased number of states are balancing against one another would remain peaceful, the reality is not entirely clear. Using basic realist premises about state behavior under international anarchy, it is easy to identify a number of scenarios less rosy than the one libertarians assume would occur should the United States retrench. These scenarios might include a world of increased nationalism, eroding norms against military aggression, increased economic autarky, and the further spread of nuclear weapons as states look to produce security for themselves. Some states may also fail to balance against threats in the wake of American retrenchment, increasing the likelihood the United States will be drawn into a major war.

Libertarians assume that in the absence of an alliance with the United States, other countries would simply increase their defense spending if they felt threatened. However, internal balancing is not a mechanical process. According to John Mearsheimer, leaders of states facing security competition are likely to use nationalism to garner support from their populations for the necessary regeneration of military capabilities.⁸⁷

Writing at the end of the Cold War, Mearsheimer suggested that Europe would revert to a pattern of recurrent warfare. The absence of the United States and the Soviet Union would leave Europe, once again, an anarchic multipolar system. The structure of the system would force the states to compete with one another, as they had prior to the Cold War. Mearsheimer argued that pre-1945 “hyper-nationalism” was a product of “security competition among the European states, which compelled elites to mobilize public support for national defense efforts.”⁸⁸

American retrenchment could similarly lead to an anarchic, multipolar Europe—thus increasing the chances of war on the continent. Such a system could engender nationalist sentiments among the populations of Europe, heightening animosities between national groups. These heightened animosities could help erode norms against military aggression that have facilitated the decline in interstate war. Nationalist groups within a country can seize on these sentiments to pursue confrontational and expansionist policies.⁸⁹ Encouraging support for increased military capabilities through nationalism might lead populations to see war as once again a means to national glory or maintaining national

⁸⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security* 15, no. 1 (Summer 1990): 7-8, 12-21, 25, and 29; see also Barry R. Posen, “Nationalism, the Mass Army, and Military Power,” *International Security* 18, no. 2 (1993): 80-124.

⁸⁸ Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future,” 12.

⁸⁹ See Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Jamie Gruffydd-Jones, “Dangerous Days: The Impact of Nationalism on Interstate Conflict,” *Security Studies* 26, no. 4 (2017): 698-728.

honor. Matters of national prestige and honor can lead to the initiation of wars when bound up in territorial claims, while at the same time increasing the intensity and duration of a conflict.⁹⁰

Nationalism and security competition might also erode the pacifying effects of economic openness. Realism suggests states are concerned about relative gains.⁹¹ States in security competition might be wary of trading with one another due to concerns about how a potential rival's economic gains might provide it with an advantage if translated into military power. They may also adopt autarkic policies for fear of undermining their economic and military self-sufficiency.⁹² Territorial conquest has become increasing anachronistic in international politics. However, the proliferation of protectionist policies might once again make aggression and preventive war seem like strategically sensible ways for states to secure the resources necessary to reduce the ability of potential rivals to cut them off economically.

If the risk of territorial aggression increases, the possession of nuclear weapons would become an attractive option for some states whose security was previously guaranteed by the United States. Nuclear weapons are most useful for deterring major territorial aggression, meaning their potential utility increases as the potential for war does.⁹³ A number of U.S. allies have either previously pursued nuclear weapons or have the capability to do so. They might choose to obtain a nuclear arsenal once responsible for their own security.

There are at least two reasons why increasing the number of nuclear weapons states may not have the pacifying effect some realists suggest they do. First, states do not always adopt the second-strike—that is, retaliatory—postures realists assume they will. Recent research shows that even in the paradigmatic case of mutual assured destruction—the Cold War superpower standoff—neither the United States nor the Soviet Union abandoned the search for a first-strike capability.⁹⁴ Moreover, political scientist Vipin Narang's research on India-Pakistan nuclear relations has demonstrated that states sometimes adopt risky postures in pursuit of goals other than deterrence.⁹⁵

Second, an increased number of nuclear weapon states will increase the chances nuclear weapons will be used even if states do adopt second-strike postures. On the one hand, simple organizational pathologies or political instability in a new nuclear state could lead to an accidental or unauthorized nuclear launch.⁹⁶ On the other hand, even for retaliatory postures, effective deterrence requires that

⁹⁰ On the relationship between "territoriality" and war, see Dominic D.P. Johnson and Monica Duffy Toft, "Grounds for War: The Evolution of Territorial Conflict." *International Security* 38, no. 3 (Winter 2013/14): 7-38. On honor as a factor prolonging wars, see Alexander Lanoszka and Michael A. Hunzeker, "Rage of Honor: Entente Indignation and the Lost Chance for Peace in the First World War," *Security Studies* 24, no. 4 (2015): 662-95.

⁹¹ On relative gains, see Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 105.

⁹² Jonathan D. Caverley, "United States Hegemony and the New Economics of Defense." *Security Studies* 16, no. 4 (2007): 600-601; and Dale C. Copeland, *Economic Interdependence and War* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), 8-10.

⁹³ Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, 109.

⁹⁴ See Austin Long and Brendan Rittenhouse Green, "Stalking the Secure Second Strike: Intelligence, Counterforce, and Nuclear Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 1-2 (2015): 38-73; and Brendan R. Green and Austin Long, "The MAD Who Wasn't There: Soviet Reactions to the Late Cold War Nuclear Balance," *Security Studies* 26, no. 4 (2017): 606-41.

⁹⁵ Vipin Narang, "Posturing for Peace?: Pakistan's Nuclear Postures and South Asian Stability," *International Security* 34, no. 3 (Winter 2009): 38-78.

⁹⁶ See Scott Sagan's contribution to Sagan and Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons*.

states credibly signal that they are willing to use nuclear weapons in retaliation for an attack. To do so requires that nuclear states in competition with one another must maintain a willingness to risk nuclear war. The greater the number of these “competition[s] in risk taking,” as Thomas Schelling called them, the more likely it is that nuclear weapons will be used at some point.⁹⁷

The situation in Northeast Asia helps illustrate how increasing the number of nuclear weapons states increases the probability that nuclear weapons will be used. Absent U.S. security guarantees, there is a real possibility that Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea would build nuclear arsenals of their own given their concerns about China and North Korea.⁹⁸ There are currently two nuclear dyads in the region: the United States and China, and the United States and North Korea. If Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea all acquired nuclear weapons, there would be at least five additional dyads: China and Taiwan, China and Japan, China and South Korea, North Korea and South Korea, and North Korea and Japan. Given lingering tensions from its pre-1945 occupation of the Korean Peninsula, a South Korea-Japanese nuclear dyad is entirely plausible as well.⁹⁹ Each new dyad adds a contest in risk-taking, which increases the chances that nuclear weapons will be used in the region.¹⁰⁰

Though America’s geographic isolation insulates it from many the threats of an increasingly competitive and unstable world, it does not provide absolute immunity. As noted above, Christopher Layne rightly highlights the major wars in Europe in which the United States did not become involved. However, the question should not be about frequency of American involvement in major power wars in Eurasia. Instead, it should be about the cost when the United States does become involved in such a conflict. The purpose of insurance is to protect against low frequency, high-cost events. There was a relatively low probability that the Soviet Union would have invaded Western Europe during the Cold War, but the United States invested in deterring an invasion because the costs of an actual war would have been higher.¹⁰¹ While the United States avoided involvement in a number of European wars, the major conflicts the United States did become involved in were high-cost events. At the height of World War II, the United States spent 37 percent of its gross domestic product on its military.¹⁰² More than 8 percent of the U.S. population was in uniform at the war’s peak.¹⁰³ The size of the American state expanded

⁹⁷ Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, 108. On deterrence as a “competition in risk-taking” see Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 94.

⁹⁸ See Mark Fitzpatrick, *Asia’s Latent Nuclear Powers: Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2016).

⁹⁹ On continued tensions over the issue of Japan’s use of Korean “comfort women” during World War II, see James Griffiths, “South Korea’s New President Questions Japan ‘Comfort Women’ Deal,” CNN.com, June 5, 2017, accessed October 18, 2017, available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/11/asia/south-korea-japan-comfort-women/index.html>. While Japan and South Korea signed an agreement in 2012 to increase military cooperation in light of North Korean provocations and the growth of Chinese military power, the South Korean public met the decision with hostility. See Choe Sang-Hun, “South Korea to Sign Military Pact with Japan,” *New York Times*, June 28, 2012, accessed October 18, 2017, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/29/world/asia/south-korea-to-sign-historic-military-pact-with-japan.html>.

¹⁰⁰ See the discussion in Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, 108-109.

¹⁰¹ Richard K. Betts, “Maybe I’ll Stop Driving,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 17, no. 4 (2005): 509.

¹⁰² Stephen Daggett, “Costs of Major Wars,” CRS Report no. RS22926 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 29, 2016), 2, available at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS22926.pdf>.

¹⁰³ See Table 1-6, “Work Force Levels – 1938 through Present,” in Department of Defense, “Selected Manpower Statistics, Fiscal Year 1997,” accessed November 7, 2017, available at: <http://www.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA347153>. The percentage of the population was calculated using estimate for total U.S. population in 1945 from “National Intercensal Tables: 1900-1990,”

massively during this time.¹⁰⁴ The United States did not need a formal military alliance with any of the belligerents prior to either of the world wars to become involved in the conflicts.

America's involvement in World War II suggests that one way the United States might become involved in another major war is if some former U.S. allies fail to build their military capabilities in the face of aggressive powers. Neoclassical realist scholars refer to this problem as "underbalancing."¹⁰⁵ According to this theory, states may fail to internally balance against a threat due to domestic political factors.¹⁰⁶ If states fail to check an aggressive power, it could pave the way for the type of hegemonic threat realists believe would require American military action.

If such a threat materialized, and if frontline states failed to contain it, the offshore balancing logic underpinning retrenchment recommends the United States regenerate its military capabilities to defeat it. Mearsheimer argues that these periodic military buildups are a feature of offshore balancing strategies. He writes:

Offshore balancers like the United Kingdom and the United States tend to maintain relatively small military forces when they are not needed to contain a potential hegemon in a strategically important area... [W]hen it is necessary for an offshore balancer to check a potential hegemon, it is likely to sharply expand the size and strength of its fighting forces, as the United States did in 1917, when it entered World War I, and in 1940, the year before it entered World War II.¹⁰⁷

Retrenchment assumes that this process would be somewhat mechanical. The United States, aware of a new threat and the inadequacy of frontline states to counter it, would convert its latent material strength into military power to confront, and if necessary, militarily defeat the threatening state.¹⁰⁸ However, the process is unlikely to be as automatic or frictionless as realists suggest. Drawing on America's economic resources to tap its latent military power would not provide the same advantage it did before World War II for two reasons. First, changes in military technology would make it difficult for the U.S. military to return to regions where it previously positioned forces. While modern technology enables the United States to project military power around the globe, it also makes it easier for potential adversaries to increase the cost of doing so. A number of states hostile to American interests

United States Census Bureau, accessed November 7, 2017, available at: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/pre-1980-national.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Bruce D. Porter, *War and the Rise of the State: The Military Foundations of Modern Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 280.

¹⁰⁵ Randall L. Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 159-201.

¹⁰⁶ On domestic barriers to higher levels of European defense spending see, Andrea Gilli, "The Trump Administration Wants Europe to Pay More to Defend Itself. It's Not That Easy," *Washington Post*, Monkey Cage blog, February 3, 2017, accessed February 3, 2017, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/03/europe-may-not-be-able-to-expand-its-defenses-like-president-trump-wants/?utm_term=.1b7d3b6c268e.

¹⁰⁷ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 157.

¹⁰⁸ John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (2016): 70-83.

have already procured anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) capabilities as a cost-effective means to prevent the U.S. military from operating near their respective territories.¹⁰⁹

Second, tapping American economic power to mobilize for war would not be the same as it was before World War II. The economic conditions that obtained before the world wars are no longer with us. There is no great surplus of labor and idle manufacturing capacity as the Great Depression had provided the United States when it converted to a war economy prior to World War II.¹¹⁰ Converting to a war economy today would therefore require far-reaching political and social disruptions.

In light of those disruptions, any effort to mobilize the American public for war would require a unifying mechanism. Realists assume nationalism is that mechanism. Ordinary Americans are unlikely to get worked up over the abstract threat of a distant regional hegemon in Eurasia. Confronted with a new military threat in Eurasia, American leaders are likely to rouse what historian Walter Russell Mead refers to as the populist “Jacksonian” tendency in American foreign policy. This tendency, Mead argues, leads to American wars that are particularly violent and destructive.¹¹¹

It is entirely possible that libertarian retrenchers are correct and none of the scenarios described above will come to pass if the United States chooses their preferred grand strategy. However, it will require a natural experiment in the robustness of norms against military aggression and incentives favoring economic interdependence to determine the outcome. If they are not robust, the world could become more competitive and conflict-prone—increasing the chances the United States would become involved in a major war. Libertarians need to ask themselves whether the benefits of retrenchment are higher than these risks.

The Costs and Benefits of Retrenchment

Libertarians suggest there are three primary benefits retrenchment would produce. First, the United States would maintain a smaller military if it retrenched—reducing the financial burden military spending imposes on the American people. Second, the reduced size of the military would lead to a smaller national security state that would be less threatening to a free society. Third, because the military would be smaller, and because threats to the national interest would be defined more narrowly, American policymakers would be less likely to go to war. However, on close examination, these benefits are either not as significant as libertarian retrenchers suggest or are unlikely to materialize altogether.

¹⁰⁹ On the increased vulnerability of American power projection capabilities, see Evan Braden Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection," *International Security* 38, no. 4 (Spring 2014): 115-49; and Jerry Hendrix, "What Cost a Carrier?" March 11, 2013, (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security). Advances in technologies such as additive manufacturing, artificial intelligence, and unmanned vehicles may drive down the cost of A2/AD capabilities even further. See T.X. Hammes, "Technologies Converge and Power Diffuses: The Evolution of Small, Smart, and Cheap Weapons," Policy Analysis, no. 786 (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, January 27, 2016). For some of the constraints on the spread of these weapons, see Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, "The Diffusion of Drone Warfare? Industrial, Organizational, and Infrastructural Constraints," *Security Studies* 25, no. 1 (2016): 50-84.

¹¹⁰ Steven Metz, "Has the United States Lost the Ability to Fight a Major War?" *Parameters* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 11.

¹¹¹ On the Jacksonian tradition in American foreign policy see Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*, 1st ed (New York: Knopf, 2001), 218-263.

From a purely financial perspective, retrenchment does cost less than engagement on a year-to-year basis, but this assessment fails to take into account the costs of even a mild military buildup. A detailed force structure assessment is beyond the scope of this paper.¹¹² However, a number of analysts have provided estimates for the size of the defense budget as a percentage of gross domestic product under their preferred grand strategies. Posen estimates that the military under retrenchment would cost 2.5 percent of GDP annually.¹¹³ A number of hawkish analysts and politicians over the years have proposed a defense budget pegged to four percent of GDP.¹¹⁴ While current defense spending as a percentage of GDP is trending lower, for the purposes of this analysis, we can assume that a grand strategy of engagement would require that three percent of GDP is spent on the military.¹¹⁵

The size of the economy is a flawed way to measure defense spending on a year-to-year basis, but these figures can provide a useful heuristic for judging the financial costs of retrenchment and engagement versus a relatively mild military buildup.¹¹⁶ Based on Congressional Budget Office projections of economic growth, a military buildup requiring four percent of GDP annually would cost more than \$4.5 trillion over a five-year period beginning in 2023. In comparison, a grand strategy of engagement requiring three percent of GDP would cost less than \$3.4 trillion over the same period, while a grand strategy of retrenchment requiring 2.5 percent of GDP annually would cost \$2.8 trillion.¹¹⁷ The United States would therefore spend \$600 billion more for a grand strategy of engagement than it would if it retrenched, but \$1.1 trillion less than under mild hypothetical military buildup at four percent of GDP. The buildup to four percent of GDP would require an additional \$1.7 trillion if the United States retrenches.¹¹⁸

The savings that retrenchment is supposed to produce are the product of maintaining a smaller military, but that smaller military would not necessarily reduce the threat the national security state poses to a

¹¹² For a detailed comparison of the cost of the different military force structures necessary for different strategic options, see Cohn, Boone, and Mahnken, "How Much is Enough?: Alternative Defense Strategies."

¹¹³ Posen, *Restraint*, 163.

¹¹⁴ See, Jim Talent, "More: The Crying Need for a Bigger U.S. Military," *National Review*, March 5, 2007, 30-35. For a compilation of Heritage essays on the idea, see Mackenzie M. Eaglen, "Four Percent for Freedom: The Need to Invest More in Defense – Selected Writings," (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2007).

¹¹⁵ Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, 127.

¹¹⁶ On the flaws inherent in comparing defense spending over time using gross domestic product, see Matthew Fay, "When 'More' is Meaningless: The Case Against a Four Percent of GDP Defense Spending Minimum" (Washington, DC: National Taxpayers Union, October 2015).

¹¹⁷ These figures are based on projections of gross domestic product in Congressional Budget Office, *An Update to the Budget and Economic Outlook: 2017 to 2027* (June 29, 2017), accessed October 1, 2017, available at:

<https://www.cbo.gov/publication/52801>. The figures were adjusted for inflation to 2017 dollars using the Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator, available at: https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

¹¹⁸ These figures do not account for potential lost revenue from decreased bilateral trade that might occur if the United States rescinds its security guarantees. A recent RAND Corporation study suggests the United States would lose up to \$490 billion in GDP each year from loss of trade in goods and services from a fifty percent retrenchment, while Posen's estimate of a 2.5 percent of GDP defense spending from an eighty percent retrenchment would provide only \$139 billion in additional GDP annually. See Daniel Egel, Adam Grissom, John P. Godges, Jennifer Kavanagh and Howard Shatz, "Estimating the Value of Overseas Security Commitments" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR518.html. However, there is disagreement from some analysts about whether security commitments actually produce increased bilateral trade. See Drezner, "Military Primacy Doesn't Pay," 59-67.

free society for two reasons. First, the military would remain quite large even if the United States retrenched. As noted above, Benjamin Friedman and Christopher Preble estimate that the U.S. military's active-duty end-strength could be reduced to 949,000 if the United States retrenched. Moreover, those forces would be garrisoned at home instead of on bases overseas.¹¹⁹ A standing military force of that size would still remain a threat to a free society if used for domestic repression.

The use of the military for domestic repression is an extreme scenario, but the second reason retrenchment is unlikely to prove beneficial for a free society has to do with the aspects of national security state dedicated to prosecuting the war on terror. Retrenchers do not consider terrorism a major threat and imply that those aspects of the national security state to combat it, such as the intelligence community, will be cut back in line with reductions in the size of the military.¹²⁰ However, most Americans do not share this view of the terrorist threat. In the 2016 election 80 percent of voters ranked terrorism as a "very important" issue, second only to the economy.¹²¹ Political demand for robust efforts to combat terrorism is therefore likely to remain high even if the United States exits its alliances and reduces the size of its military.

The reduced size of the military under retrenchment would also be unlikely to significantly affect policymakers' willingness to use it. Libertarian advocates of retrenchment are correct when they argue that the military force structure and forward-deployed forces required for the United States to maintain its security guarantees tempts American policymakers to use military force promiscuously.¹²² However, reducing the size of the military to the levels required for retrenchment is unlikely to solve this problem because retrenchment cannot starve policymakers of the forces necessary to undertake interventions.

Even advocates for retrenchment regularly acknowledge that the United States would retain the most powerful military in the world after their strategy is implemented.¹²³ Moreover, retrenchment assumes that the United States would still have to project power globally under specific circumstances. It also assumes the United States would maintain the necessary industrial capacity to produce additional power projection capabilities in a crisis. Therefore, the force structure the United States would possess if it retrenched would still be deployable to various trouble spots around the globe where American leaders may wish to intervene. Libertarians cannot guarantee that presidents who embrace their worldview will be elected on a consistent basis. Retrenchment relies on the reduction of America's

¹¹⁹ On ending overseas basing, see Glaser, "Withdrawing from Overseas Bases."

¹²⁰ Friedman and Preble, "Budgetary Savings from Military Restraint," 2 & 7. On terrorism as a minor threat, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "The Terrorism Delusion: America's Overwrought Response to September 11th," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 81-110.

¹²¹ "2016 Campaign: Strong Interest, Widespread Dissatisfaction," Pew Research Center, July 7, 2016, accessed October 18, 2017, available at: <http://www.people-press.org/2016/07/07/2016-campaign-strong-interest-widespread-dissatisfaction/>. Trump supporters demonstrated particular concerns about terrorism, with 59 percent of them agreeing that anti-terrorism policies to date "had not gone far enough." See Samantha Smith, "6 Charts that Show Where Clinton and Trump Supporters Differ," Pew Research Center, "Fact Tank," October 20, 2016, available at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/20/6-charts-that-show-where-clinton-and-trump-supporters-differ/>.

¹²² Preble, *The Power Problem*, 87-88. See also Sapolsky, Friedman, Gholz, and Press, "Restraining Order," 87.

¹²³ See Benjamin H. Friedman, Brendan Rittenhouse Green, and Justin Logan, in "Debating American Engagement: The Future of U.S. Grand Strategy." *International Security* 38, no. 2 (2013): 188.

armed forces to prevent their promiscuous use, but the logic of the strategy demands that the military remain deployable. Therefore, the temptation to use military force would remain even if the United States retrenched.

If the United States pursues retrenchment as its grand strategy, the benefits for a free society would be marginal. There are real financial savings available from the type of retrenchment libertarians envision; yet they could vanish if even a mild military buildup is necessary. The aspects of the national security state with the most potential to threaten a free society will remain. And the U.S. military will retain the ability to project power around the globe, thus providing American leaders the continued ability to use military force promiscuously should they so choose.

Rethinking Libertarian Foreign Policy

The arguments presented above suggest that libertarians should abandon their desire for American retrenchment and instead embrace an American foreign policy that remains politically and militarily engaged in the world. By participating in security institutions, the United States can continue to help reduce security competition in the international system and provide incentives for cooperation among its leading powers. In doing so, it can continue to contribute to a liberal international order that facilitates a more peaceful and open international system abroad and better serves a free society at home. However, that does not mean libertarians should be satisfied with the foreign policy status quo. This section discusses the policy implications of this argument.

From a policy perspective, libertarians would be well served by reforming existing security commitments, rather than abandoning them wholesale. And while not discussed in this paper, the proper role of the military in a free society is an issue in dire need of libertarian attention.¹²⁴ However, as this section explains, the main priority for libertarian foreign policy advocates should be preventing the reckless use of U.S. military power.

Advocates of retrenchment assume if that if America is not restrained, as they define it, it is therefore unrestrained.¹²⁵ That is, the United States will continue to use military force frequently and counterproductively unless it narrowly defines its interest in terms of its own security, gives up its alliances, and brings its forward-deployed military forces home. History provides some evidence to back up this assumption. With the end of the Cold War, America's military might and lack of rivals enabled military interventions in places ranging from the Caribbean to the Horn of Africa to the Balkans to the Persian Gulf and the Hindu Kush—for reasons ranging from altruistic to venal to foolish. During the Cold War, the United States too often went to war because of misperceptions about the spread of

¹²⁴ For the author's take on the need to address this issue, see Matthew Fay, "Valuing the Military in a Liberal Society," Niskanen Center, July 13, 2017, accessed October 18, 2017, available at: <https://niskanencenter.org/blog/valuing-military-liberal-society/>.

¹²⁵ Brooks and Wohlforth cite this as the reason they use "retrenchment" when referring to the strategy they argue against: "[R]estraint is a very a problematic term. Most notably, the term implies that the pursuit of deep engagement is, and must be, 'unrestrained' regarding the use of force. See Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, 4, fn ii.

Communism and because American leaders wrongly believed they needed to prove their credibility to allies.¹²⁶ These interventions have been costly in terms of lives—both of American military personnel and innocent civilians in foreign war zones—and treasure. At the same time, the perception that the United States is an aggressive military power undermines the liberal international order it helped construct.¹²⁷

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright inadvertently summed up this problem when she reportedly said to former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, “What’s the point of this superb military that you’re always talking about if we can’t use it?”¹²⁸ To act as a security guarantor, the United States is required to maintain a superb military. Yet possessing such a superb military and forward deploying to it to deter aggression and assure allies inevitably tempts policymakers to use it.

As discussed above, the assumption that retrenchment would solve this problem is flawed. The supposition that retrenchment would help avoid the promiscuous use of military force is premised on starving policymakers of the forces necessary to undertake what Brooks and Wohlforth refer to as “optional” military interventions. However, as discussed above, the United States would still maintain a military capable of projecting power globally even if it retrenched.¹²⁹ Libertarians putting their hope in retrenchment as a means to doing away with the promiscuous use of military force are in reality pinning their hopes on the consistent election of presidents who share their world-view. Regardless of who is elected after the United States retrenches, they will still retain a “superb military” that can be used frequently.

Assuming the benefits of remaining engaged in the world outweigh those of retrenchment, there are two ways to approach this problem. First, the problem could be ignored. Just as with the objections noted above, the question of optional interventions could be weighed against the potential danger that increased security competition poses to the international system and a free society. Major power wars are far more destructive, deadly, and costly than America’s optional interventions. If the maintenance of a liberal international order prevents wars of that type, and the military means necessary to underpin that order necessarily tempt American policymakers to intervene frequently around the globe, then perhaps it is necessary to live with such optional interventions.

Living with promiscuous interventions, however, is not an option libertarians should choose. Military interventions inevitably lead to the deaths of innocent civilians, they impose long-term costs on American taxpayers, they can engender blowback that perpetuates a cycle of violence, and equipment

¹²⁶ There is some evidence to suggest that the decision to escalate U.S. military involvement in Vietnam was due to a perceived need to demonstrate the credibility of American military power. See Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 92-94. For an overview of the debate about the perceived need for the United States to demonstrate credibility, see Max Fisher, “The Credibility Trap,” *Vox*, April 29, 2016, accessed October 18, 2017, available at: <https://www.vox.com/2016/4/29/11431808/credibility-foreign-policy-war>.

¹²⁷ For example, Russia justifies its actions in Ukraine by citing U.S. military interventions. See Kundani, “What is the Liberal International Order?” 6.

¹²⁸ Colin L. Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 576.

¹²⁹ Advocates for retrenchment themselves argue that even after cutting the size of the military it will remain a “military with global reach far exceeding any rival.” See Friedman, Green, and Logan, in “Debating American Engagement,” 188.

used in American military interventions has even been turned against American citizens through programs that provide surplus U.S. military equipment to local police departments.¹³⁰ Interventions also drain American power and undermine the legitimacy necessary for leadership of the liberal international order.¹³¹ Instead, a second option is for libertarians to find policies that inhibit the use of military force.

Libertarians have frequently called for Congress to reassert its prerogatives when it comes to declaring war, but to no avail. They rightly acknowledge that Congress has incentives to consistently punt on its responsibility to oversee the use of military force. Doing so allows legislators to claim credit when a conflict goes well or to blame the executive branch when a war goes poorly.¹³² However, even if Congress were to take back its power to authorize military action, debating and authorizing the use of military force would not prevent promiscuous or counterproductive military actions.¹³³

The United States can intervene so frequently abroad because the costs of doing so have little direct impact on the American people in terms of either blood or treasure. Only a small percentage of the American people serve in the military. Few Americans will lose their lives in combat or even know someone who has.¹³⁴ America's wars in recent years have been debt-financed. The financial costs of war are therefore invisible and do not affect the vast majority of the American people in any tangible way. While the public laments increasing debt, they do not respond to it in the same way they do increased taxes because the individual financial impact is deferred.¹³⁵

That the American public is insulated from the costs of war means they have little incentive to hold accountable the politicians who initiate and oversee the use of military force. Instead of trying to overthrow seventy years of U.S. foreign policy in ways that are risky and counterproductive from the perspective of a peaceful world and a free society, libertarians are better served finding ways to internalize the costs of America's wars. Bringing back the military draft is one way to do so.¹³⁶ However, conscription is antithetical to both libertarian principles and the needs of a modern military. Recent

¹³⁰ On the program to sell surplus military equipment to local police forces in the United States, see Radley Balko, *Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013), 301-303.

¹³¹ Drezner, "Military Primacy Doesn't Pay," 73. The Cost of War Project at Brown University's Watson Center for International and Public Affairs estimated that as of November 2017 the wars since 2001 have cost \$5.6 trillion. See Neta C. Crawford, "United States Budgetary Costs of Post-9/11 Wars Through 2018: A Summary of the \$5.6 Trillion in Costs for the U.S. Wars in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and Post-9/11 Veterans Care and Homeland Security," (Providence, RI: Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, November 2017), available at: <http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/news/Costs%20of%20U.S.%20Post-9%2011%20NC%20Crawford%20FINAL%20.pdf>.

¹³² For a good discussion of this problem, see Gene Healy, *The Cult of the Presidency: America's Dangerous Devotion to Executive Power* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2008).

¹³³ See Matthew Fay, "Authorizing Military Force is Necessary, but Insufficient," *The Hill*, October 4, 2017, accessed October 4, 2017, available at: <http://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/353829-authorizing-military-force-is-necessary-but-insufficient>.

¹³⁴ For a good overview of the both the benefits and potential negative consequences of the shrinking size of the U.S. military and its recruiting pool, see Amy Schafer, "Generations of War: The Rise of the Warrior Caste and the All-Volunteer Force" (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, May 8, 2017).

¹³⁵ For the reasons why reductions in revenue do not lead to reduced demands for government services, see William A. Niskanen, "Limiting Government: The Failure of 'Starve the Beast,'" *The Cato Journal* 26, no. 3 (2006): 553-558.

¹³⁶ Michael C. Horowitz and Matthew S. Levendusky, "Drafting Support for War: Conscription and Mass Support for Warfare," *The Journal of Politics* 73, no. 2 (2011): 524-34.

experimental research instead suggests that a special-purpose tax to pay for the use of force may be a more realistic option.¹³⁷

Conclusion

A small number of libertarians pinned their hopes on the idea that Donald Trump's "America First" foreign policy meant the United States would do less abroad. Doing less, many libertarians assume, will mean the United States will be at war less frequently, it can reduce the size of its military, and a free society will flourish. While Trump's militarism and hostility to the free movement of goods and people should have made him unacceptable from a libertarian perspective, the foreign policy retrenchment that some libertarians saw underlying his America First slogan is also unlikely to facilitate the type of free society libertarians seek.

Libertarian ends are better served by a grand strategy of engagement in the world. A grand strategy of engagement presents risks and temptations. However, the risks of retrenchment are higher. It requires running a natural experiment in the endurance of the liberal international order, while providing few benefits for a free society. Instead of attempting to overthrow seven decades of American foreign policy in ways that could lead to a more conflict-prone world, libertarians should find ways to internalize the costs of war to discourage the promiscuous use of military force.

¹³⁷ Gustavo A. Flores-Macías and Sarah E. Kreps, "Borrowing Support for War: The Effect of War Finance on Public Attitudes toward Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no. 5 (2017): 997-1020; and Douglas Kriner, Breanna Lechase, and Rosella Cappella Zielinski, "Self-Interest, Partisanship, and the Conditional Influence of Taxation on Support for War in the USA," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* (2015): 1-22.