

The Risks of Ignoring Strategic Insolvency

A moment has arrived when a great power with global responsibilities is having a crisis of confidence. Its economy has grown sluggish and it is being overtaken by a number of rising competitors. Financial pressures loom, notably the ability to keep a balance between government revenues and expenses. It is losing long-standing superiorities—psychological as well as technological and numerical—in key categories of military power; this great power, whose diplomats and military leaders manage active or potential conflicts from Afghanistan to Europe with treaty alliances as far flung as Japan and Australia, confronts the need for constraints on its global ambitions and posture. This urgent reckoning has been prompted in part by a painful and largely unnecessary counterinsurgency war far from home that cost many times more than initially thought and exhausted the country's overstretched land forces.

The moment in question is the period 1890–1905, and the power is Great Britain. In one sense, London was riding the crest of her imperial power: As brilliantly narrated by Robert K. Massie, the Diamond Jubilee of 1897 broadcast the image of an empire at its apogee.¹ Yet even as Britain paraded its navy before the world, many of its leaders were suffering through a two-decade surge of pessimism about the prospects for their global role. They saw their economic prospects dimming, their finances unresponsive of endless foreign commitments, and their naval as well as land power strained by global commitments that pressed against the burgeoning power of a half-dozen regional challengers. As Princeton scholar Aaron Friedberg has put it, “The nation appeared to have its

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neck in a gradually tightening noose from which no easy escape was possible”; without a national crisis to justify new taxes “there seemed no way of avoiding eventual insolvency.”²

Despite this awareness, that insolvency was destined to hit home during a number of key moments from the Boer War to post-war colonial crises to Suez. Britain suffered this fate in part because successive governments in London, although scaling back military and diplomatic commitments in a fashion that many commentators have found to be a masterful example of stepping back from global primacy,³ still could not bring themselves to make a clean break with a deeply-ingrained strategic posture and fashion a more sustainable global role. Great Britain remained continually overextended, and suffered the drawn-out consequences.

Throughout history, major powers have confronted painful inflection points when their resources, their national will, or the global geopolitical context no longer sustained their strategic postures. The very definition of grand strategy is holding ends and means in balance to promote the security and interests of the state.⁴ Yet, the post-war U.S. approach to strategy is rapidly becoming insolvent and unsustainable—not only because Washington can no longer afford it but also, crucially, because it presumes an American relationship with friends, allies, and rivals that is the hallmark of a bygone era. If Washington continues to cling to its existing role on the premise that the international order depends upon it, the result will be increasing resistance, economic ruin, and strategic failure.

The alleged insolvency of American strategy has been exhaustively chronicled and debated since the 1990s. The argument here is that twenty years of warnings will finally come true over the next five to ten years, unless

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we adjust much more fundamentally than administrations of either party have been willing to do so far. The forces undercutting the U.S. strategic posture are reaching critical mass. This is not an argument about “decline” as such; the point here is merely that specific, structural trends in U.S. domestic governance and international politics are rendering a particular approach to grand strategy insolvent. Only by acknowledging the costs of pursuing yesterday’s strategy, under today’s constraints,

will it be possible to avoid a sort of halfway adjustment billed as true reform, forfeiting the opportunity for genuine strategic reassessment. That opportunity still exists today, but it is fading.

Enduring Assumptions

The consensus of conventional wisdom today holds several specific tenets of U.S. national security strategy dear. It is important to grasp the paradigm because existing trends are making a very specific U.S. national security posture infeasible. The primary elements include:

- America's global role was central to constructing the post-war order and remains essential to its stability today;
- American military power, including the ability to project power into any major regional contingency, is predominant and should remain so for as long as possible, both to reassure allies and to dissuade rivals;
- The stability of many regions has become dependent on a substantial U.S. regional presence of bases, forward-deployed combat forces, and active diplomatic engagement;
- That stability is also inextricably linked to the security and well-being of the U.S. homeland;
- The United States must commit to the force structures, technologies, non-military capacities, and geopolitical voice required to sustain these concepts.

This conventional wisdom is the core of the current administration's major U.S. strategy documents—the 2010 National Security Strategy and 2011 National Military Strategy—which envision continued U.S. predominance and global power projection. In fact, it has been central to all post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy doctrines. It was Bill Clinton's Secretary of State who called America “the indispensable nation,”⁵ Clinton who decided to expand NATO to Russia's doorstep and Clinton who inaugurated the post-Cold War frenzy of humanitarian intervention.⁶ The George W. Bush administration embraced a strategy of primacy and dissuading global competition. As Barry Posen has remarked, the debate in post-Cold War U.S. grand strategy has been over what *form* of hegemony to seek, not *whether* to seek it.⁷

A variety of powerful trends now suggest that the existing paradigm is becoming unsustainable in both military and diplomatic terms, and that the United States will inevitably have to divert from its current posture to a new, more sustainable role.

Engines of a Paradigm Shift

To be clear, a significant U.S. leadership role in world politics remains important and viable. But the current paradigm suffers from cracks in a number of key foundational areas. This essay briefly summarizes five: disappearing finances;

rising alternative power centers; declining U.S. military predominance; a lack of efficacy of key non-military instruments of power; and reduced domestic patience for global adventures. These threats to U.S. strategic solvency have existed for decades—but they are accelerating, and maturing, in new and decisive ways.

The first threat is budgetary. Debt is set to rise significantly over the next decade, in some scenarios approaching 100 percent of GDP shortly after 2020, along with interest payments—by one estimate, rising from \$146 billion in 2010 to over \$800 billion in 2020.⁸ This has already raised fears of downgraded U.S. credit ratings and threats to the dollar as a reserve currency. The corresponding social austerity and financial pressures at all levels of government, as well as a public hostility to taxes, mean that spending cuts will bear the burden of deficit reduction.⁹ In recognition of this, several bipartisan budget proposals include major defense cuts. Groups pushing for serious deficit control have aimed for \$800 billion to over \$1 trillion in ten-year defense reductions, and even those may be just a down payment on a larger bill to follow. Further, the defense budget faces its own internal budget issues: for example, Tricare, the military's health program, costs the Department of Defense triple the amount of just a decade ago, and the annual costs of the military pension program may balloon from just over \$52 billion in 2011 to as much as \$117 billion by 2035.¹⁰ This is putting further pressure on those components of the defense budget essential to global strategy and power projection.

A second trend is the rise of alternative centers of power: states and influential non-state actors are clamoring to set the global affairs agenda and determine key outcomes.¹¹ A fundamental reality of the last two or more decades has been an emerging reaction against U.S. primacy—many others desire that U.S. influence decline and contrary centers of power strengthen.¹² This trend is now accelerating, and the coming decade seems certain to represent the full emergence of an international system of more assertive powers who are less interested in dominant U.S. leadership. More and more nations, from Brazil to Turkey to India, while far from “anti-American” in their foreign policy or hostile to American leadership per se, have become disaffected with the idea of a U.S.-centric world order, and are determined to squeeze out U.S. influence on certain issues to claim greater influence for themselves. Related to this is a set of geopolitical trends reducing the perceived salience of American power: The end of the Cold War reduced the perceived urgency for U.S. protection; the Arab Spring and other developments have brought to power governments uninterested in U.S. sponsorship; and the reaction to globalization, including reaffirmations of ethnic, religious, and national identity, has in some places spilled over into a resentment of American social and cultural hegemony.

A third trend is declining U.S. military predominance and a fast-approaching moment when the United States will be unable to project power into key regions of the world. The reasons are partly technological—rising actors have burgeoning capabilities in anti-ship missiles, drones, or other “area denial” structures.¹³ Moreover, actors have also found other ways to counter American power: major states like China or Russia now possess the ability—through financial, space, or energy means—to threaten massive global consequences in response to unwanted U.S. force. This includes cyber mayhem: as one recent survey concluded, cyber weapons “allow, for the first time in history, small states with minimal defense budgets to inflict serious harm on a vastly stronger foe at extreme ranges,” a new form of vulnerability that would “greatly constrain America’s use of force abroad.”¹⁴ An important new RAND report by Paul Davis and Peter Wilson warns of an “impending crisis in defense planning” arising “from technology diffusion that is leveling aspects of the playing field militarily, geostrategic changes, and the range of potential adversaries.”¹⁵ These challenges are exacerbated by a crisis of defense procurement; America’s leading-edge military systems are becoming less affordable and reliable. Aircraft carriers, for example, have become prohibitively expensive, with costs set to break through congressionally-imposed limits next year.¹⁶ The systems that undergird U.S. military primacy are being whittled down to a small handful that no president will readily risk in anything but the most essential of crises.

A fourth threat to U.S. global strategy is that America’s non-military tools of influence have proven incapable of achieving key U.S. goals in the areas nominated as the leading security challenges of the future—transnational, sub-state threats, and the risks emanating from fragile states. While states have well-established theories for pursuing traditional political-military ends with diplomacy and force, the United States possesses no proven models for achieving progress in the social, psychological, and environmental costs of an integrating globe—areas such as regional instability, terrorism, the complexities of development, radicalism, aggressive nationalism, organized crime, resource shortages, and ecological degradation.¹⁷ For half a century, the United States was a dominant global power which identified challenging core goals and tasks—detering military adventurism, building political-military alliances, erecting mutually-beneficial institutions of trade—but to which Washington could apply established models and techniques. U.S. leadership and power becomes much more problematic in a world of complex problems which generate no broad agreement and which subject themselves to no clear solutions.

Fifth and finally, even as America’s power projection instruments have become less usable and effective, the American people have grown less willing to use them. A 2009 poll by the Pew Research Center found that 49 percent of those surveyed, an all-time record, said that the United States should

“mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own.” That number jumped from 30 percent in 2002.¹⁸ Those who favor a powerful American leadership role in the world have also declined in Gallup polling. For example, the percentage fell from 75 in 2009 to 66 in mid-2011, while the percentage advocating a far more minimal U.S. role grew from 23 percent to 32 percent.¹⁹ Over 40 percent of Americans now say the country spends too much on defense, compared with less than a quarter who say it spends too little.²⁰ Many Americans want their nation to remain a global leader,²¹ but the public is less enamored with the massive expenditures and national efforts necessary to sustain the existing paradigm.

The Risks of Strategic Bankruptcy

Avoiding coming to terms with U.S. strategic insolvency will damage U.S. credibility.

The default response to looming failures in strategic posture has so far been, and will likely continue to be, to chip away at its edges and avoid exhausting fundamental reform. Some would argue that persistence, or incremental change, is the best course: avoiding the risks—to U.S. credibility, to the international system, to the domestic political health of whatever administration waded into it—of recalibrating U.S. power in the form of cascading loss of faith in American credibility.²² This is a mistake; in fact, refusing to come to terms with U.S. strategic insolvency will damage U.S. credibility and global stability to a far greater degree. A well-managed readjustment will better avoid the pitfalls of strategic insolvency.²³ Persisting without reform substantially increases the risk of a number of specific strategic perils.

Global strategies and specific military plans lose credibility. As the leading power is overtaken by others, if it refuses to prioritize and attempts instead to uphold all its commitments equally, the credibility of its regional plans, postures, and threats is destined to erode. Recent literature on credibility argues that it is not based merely on past actions, but from an adversary’s calculations of the current power capabilities at a state’s disposal.²⁴ When Hitler’s Germany was considering whether to take seriously the pledges and commitments of the Western allies, for example, he paid much more attention to their existing capabilities, their current national will, and the perceived feasibility of their strategic posture than to reputations formed over years or decades of actions. Indeed, such judgments seem to derive not from a checklist of a rival’s defense programs or military actions, but from a much more diffuse and visceral sense of the trajectory of a state’s power relative to its current posture.

What is now clear is that the consensus of such perceptions is shifting decisively against the tenability of the existing U.S. paradigm of global power projection. It is, in fact, natural for rising challengers to see weakness in the leading power's capacities as a by-product of the growing self-confidence and faith in their own abilities. There is already abundant evidence of such perceptual shifts in the assertive leaders and elites of rising powers today, who—while respecting continuing U.S. strengths and expecting the United States to remain the *primus inter pares* for decades to come, perhaps indefinitely—nonetheless see current U.S. global commitments as excessive for a debt-ridden and “declining” power.

In China, as a leading example, senior officials and influential analysts view the United States as troubled, overextended, and increasingly unable to fulfill its defense paradigm. They believe that the United States will continue as a global power, but expect it to be in a different guise.²⁵ Conversations with business, government, and military officials from burgeoning powers such as India, Turkey, Brazil, and Indonesia produce the same broad theme: Structural trends in economics, politics, and military affairs are undermining the degree of American predominance and the sustainability of the existing paradigm of U.S. influence. A leading theme is a growing belief in the social and economic decay of the U.S. model and the inability of U.S. political system to address major issues. Recent polls and studies of opinion in emerging powers come to many of the same conclusions.²⁶

These perceptions will be fed and nurtured by parallel actions and trends which will undercut the viability of the existing paradigm. Critics at home are already suggesting that the United States will be unable to sustain the demands of its “strategic tilt to Asia” given planned budget cuts, or meet the requirements of both Middle East and Asian contingencies.²⁷ As the United States is forced to pursue cost-saving measures, such as cancellations of major weapons systems or troop reductions from key regions, the sense of a paradigm in free-fall will accelerate. We see this already in the recommendations in many reports, even those arguing for a general promotion of forward deployment, for a reduction if not elimination of the U.S. force presence in Europe.²⁸

In addition to a loss of global credibility, a paradigm in crisis also threatens the credibility of specific U.S. military and foreign policy doctrines. When concepts and doctrines flow from stressed conventional-wisdom worldviews, those concepts and doctrines begin to take on the air of empty rhetoric. A good parallel was the British “two-power” doctrine (the notion that the Royal Navy should match the world's next two best fleets combined), which eventually became a form of self-reassurance without strategic significance. After a certain point, Aaron Friedberg explains, “official analyses of Britain's position took on an air of incompleteness and unreality.”²⁹ One can begin to sense this tendency in some recent U.S. conceptual statements, such as AirSea Battle: from all the public evidence, this concept appears to respond to growing challenges to U.S.

power projection capabilities with an immense amount of vague rhetoric about intentions,³⁰ coupled with bold new plans to expand planned military efforts in precisely the region where such insertion of military might is becoming more problematic. Meantime, the heyday of counterinsurgency doctrine appears to have come and gone.

A perception of strategic insolvency, if not corrected by a readjustment of priorities and commitments, will trigger a decline in perceived credibility of threats and promises. The risk then becomes that, in a future scenario, an American administration will lurch into a crisis assuming that it can take actions with the same effect as before. Instead, a pledge or demand will be ignored by an adversary (or an ally or friend) now unimpressed with the viability of U.S. defense policy—and the United States will find itself in a conflict that its degraded defense posture could not forestall. Advocates of the current paradigm agree with the risk, but have a different solution: expand the defense budget; reaffirm global commitments; reassure allies. But the United States simply does not have that option because, as argued above, the factors closing down on the current paradigm are not merely momentary or reversible—they are structural. The only way out is a recalibrated strategic posture.

A related risk, then, is a form of strategic opportunity cost. Every ounce of energy spent trying to prop up an obsolete strategic paradigm forfeits the opportunity to discover new and sustainable ways of meeting the same U.S. interests and goals. The pivot to Asia is a perfect example. Instead of pursuing the pivot and institutionalizing an unsustainable U.S. regional position, Washington should be constructing and moving toward a post-primacy architecture in Asia. The fact is that we have a limited grace period—perhaps a decade, perhaps less—to put into place regional and global security architectures for a post-primacy world, structures that envision a revised while still prominent role for the United States. Using that precious and dwindling time to prop up a fraying paradigm would be counterproductive.

Diplomacy increasingly fails. A parallel risk has to do with the ebbing force of U.S. diplomacy and influence. International power is grounded in legitimacy, and in many ways it is precisely the *legitimacy* of the leading power's global posture that is under assault as its posture comes into question. Historically, rising challengers gradually stop respecting the hegemon's right to lead, and they begin to make choices on behalf of the international community, in part due to strategies consciously designed to frustrate the leading power's designs. Germany, under Bismarck and after, is one example: It aspired to unification and to its "rightful place" as a leading European power—as its power and influence accumulated, its willingness to accept the inherent legitimacy of the existing order as defined by other states, and the validity and force of their security

paradigms, declined proportionately. At nearly all points in this trajectory, German leaders did not seek to depose the international system, but to crowd into its leadership ranks, to mute the voices of others relative to its own influence, and to modify rather than abolish rules.

We begin to see this pattern today with regard to many emerging powers, but especially of course, China's posture toward the United States.³¹ As was predicted and expected in the post-Cold War context of growing regional power centers, the legitimacy of a system dominated by the United States is coming under increasing challenge. More states (and, increasingly, non-state actors) want to share in setting rules and norms and dictating outcomes.

The obvious and inevitable result has been to reduce the effectiveness of U.S. diplomacy. While measuring the relative success of a major power's diplomacy over time is a chancy business (and while Washington continues to have success on many fronts), the current trajectory is producing a global system much less subject to the power of U.S. diplomacy and other forms of influence. Harvard's Stephen Walt catalogues the enormous strengths of the U.S. position during and after the Cold War, and compares that to recent evidence of the emerging limits of U.S. power. Such evidence includes Turkey's unwillingness to support U.S. deployments in Iraq, the failure to impose U.S. will or order in Iraq or Afghanistan, failures of nonproliferation in North Korea and Iran, the Arab Spring's challenges to long-standing U.S. client rulers, and more.³² As emerging powers become more focused on their own interests and goals, their domestic dynamics will become ever more self-directed and less subject to manipulation from Washington, a trend evident in a number of major recent elections.³³

The global system is becoming much less subject to the power of U.S. diplomacy.

Washington will still enjoy substantial influence, and many states will welcome (openly or grudgingly) a U.S. leadership role. But without revising the U.S. posture, the gap between U.S. ambitions and capabilities will only grow. Continually trying to do too much will create more risk—risk of demands unmet, requests unfulfilled, and a growing sense of the absurdity of the U.S. posture. Such a course risks crisis and conflict. Similarly, doubt in the threats and promises underpinning an unviable U.S. security posture risks conflict: U.S. officials will press into situations assuming that their diplomacy will be capable of achieving certain outcomes—and will make demands and lay out ultimatums on that basis—only to find that their influence cannot achieve the desired goals, and they must escalate to harsher measures. The alternative is to shift to a lesser role with more limited ambitions and more sustainable legitimacy.

A military force comes under increased stress and risks military setbacks.

A state trying to do more than it can afford, as a treasury or a society, risks overextending its military, with possibly ruinous results. We are already beginning to see the evidence: U.S. ground forces are showing symptoms of stress and exhaustion—in terms of post-traumatic stress levels, reenlistment challenges at key officer grades, tragic suicide numbers, and other indices.³⁴ After ten years of continuous deployments, equipment has become worn down, and there are growing reports of everything from ships being unready for missions because of wear and tear to aircraft engines exploding to cruisers with hull cracks to radar technology failing inspections.³⁵ As of the first quarter of 2011, just over 40 percent of Navy and marine aircraft were judged “mission capable,” according to the services—well off the 60 percent goal, itself seemingly modest.³⁶ The vice chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force, for example, testified in July 2011 that “this high operations tempo (OPTEMPO) has had some detrimental effects on our overall readiness. Since 2003, we have seen a slow but steady decline in reported unit readiness indicators.”³⁷ The “stress on the force is real and it is relentless,” said Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jon Greenert.³⁸

The existing paradigm, then, threatens to destabilize the U.S. military, both in terms of personnel and equipment. Defenders of the existing paradigm have a

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simple cure: more resources. Ramp up procurement budgets, expand the Army and Corps, boost readiness funding, and solve the problem. As argued above, however, the financial ceiling descending on U.S. security capacities is not fungible, it is structural. There is no way to avoid further substantial cuts without worsening cuts to domestic programs that will already be excruciating. Americans would have to absorb a lower standard of living in order to continue to

underwrite global primacy. If they will not, then persisting in the current posture will gradually erode the health and readiness of U.S. military forces.

The ultimate result of this dangerous practice will be military setbacks in the field. Overextended U.S. forces unable to bring their full complement of equipment to the fight will be unable to prioritize. Meantime, adversaries employing the asymmetric techniques discussed above (the proliferating means of anti-access and area denial, as well as space and cyber counterstrike capabilities) will impose costs which will horrify a U.S. public accustomed to “virtual wars.” In sum, remaining locked in the current paradigm invites future embarrassments, setbacks, and even defeats.

Toward a Revised Posture

Historians Harold and Margaret Sprout summarized Britain's bankrupt strategy in an age of dimming empire: Britain had "too heavy commitments, depleted capabilities, [and] extreme reluctance to relinquish the role of a Great Power."³⁹

This aptly describes the United States today.

The argument here is not to surrender a central, leading U.S. global role—it is to refashion that role in a manner that achieves many of the same goals, but in a more sustainable way. Advocates of the current paradigm emphasize the dangers of moving off the current posture, such as worrying allies about the U.S. desire to remain engaged in regional affairs. As we have seen, however, the risks of refusing to reform a bankrupt posture

are far greater. Washington's current paradigm is being undermined; the only question now is whether U.S. officials take the initiative to craft a persuasive, credible, innovative concept to supplant it.

At the moment, there seems little interest in such a process. The existing paradigm is deeply ingrained in habits of thought and assumptions about the nature of world politics and the necessary U.S. role in the international system. For ideological and political reasons, the managers of U.S. national security remain resistant to necessary changes. Even the Obama administration, which promised a transformation of U.S. foreign policy, has reaffirmed and even deepened many aspects of the conventional paradigm. Successive U.S. administrations will be likely to apply well-established concepts, doctrines, worldviews, and ideologies—for example, the forward deployment of U.S. military forces in support of regional alliances and the U.S. commitment to global precision strikes for counterterror purposes—whose effect will be to emphasize or even exaggerate the immediate threats facing the United States, and to militate against dramatic changes in the existing paradigm.

Most likely, we will see a sort of halfway strategic reform: policies will make a *seeming* shift to a supposedly constrained posture without actually surrendering the core elements of the current paradigm. A perfect example of such an approach can be found in a recent essay by two former senior Obama administration officials, who firmly reject "retrenchment" while offering something they call "realignment" as an answer to the obvious need for "a recalibration of the United States' global military posture."⁴⁰ Their "realignment" in fact defends nearly all the existing paradigm's assumptions. Such halfway choices forfeit the opportunity for innovative strategic thinking at a critical transition moment. They do not represent coherent, truly sustainable strategic postures, and they leave the time

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bomb at the core of the current paradigm—the essential mismatch between ends and means—ticking loudly away.

If a future U.S. administration were interested in a more dramatic break from the existing posture, what steps might it take? This essay has been mostly a diagnosis; elements of a cure are largely beyond its scope. Some principles do, however, suggest themselves. The first is a theme on which both history and current analyses of the U.S.

predicament speak most loudly: the essential causes of great power constraints and strengths are always to be found at home, in the economic and social foundations of national power. Without an energetic campaign to reinvigorate institutions of national governance to address key national problems, catalyze growth and innovation in key sectors of the economy, build 21st-century energy and education sectors, and more, every other proposal for U.S. grand strategy will represent mere rhetoric.

Second, the U.S. military establishment must shrink, and be deployed less with a stronger capacity to arrive with decisive force when required. This can be accomplished through a combination of emerging capabilities (cyber, unmanned vehicle, stealth, long-range precision strike) as well as hard core, over-the-horizon capabilities that can overawe the military of any single aggressor state. Such capabilities can sustain U.S. deterrent and effectively “veto” large-scale aggression. The United States need not withdraw from all forward-deployed commitments, but it will need to assess its current slate much more frugally.

Third, U.S. strategists need to design a new arrangement which preserves the essential function of U.S. power in the current system—shaping conditional preferences of other states—in different, more constrained, shared, and efficient ways.⁴¹ There is not space to sketch out what this might mean in detail. One piece, however, could be to help the world community comprehend events—to help their capabilities in anticipation and response by expanding investments in knowledge, intelligence, and strategic foresight. A second component will be to become more adept at, and expand and deepen existing efforts in, rallying coalitions despite state reluctance, from China to Europe, to bear leadership burdens in a range of areas from anti-piracy to global warming to counterproliferation.⁴²

Unlike Great Britain, a less-dominant United States has no rising liberal democracy to whom it can hand off leadership of the world community. The only alternative, as challenging as it will be, is to make U.S. global strategy much more purposeful in inviting a set of emerging powers into the shared leadership

of norm- and institution-bound world politics. This is a natural extension of the international system the United States set out to build in 1945. The approach retains a realistic core by preserving a U.S. military force sufficient to threaten any single large-scale aggressor, a backstop to multilateral norms and institutions. It is by no means a perfect option, but for a state confronting an insolvent strategic posture, no perfect option exists.

Bismarck once remarked that the essence of strategy is the ability to hear the hoof-beats of history. They are clamoring for our attention today, thundering in the background as the United States goes about daily business as it has for the last sixty years. Meanwhile, key assumptions that have supported the current U.S. posture, as well as America's ability to sustain a dominant role, are being called into question at an accelerating rate. These facts grow more obvious and insistent with every passing year—as do the dangers of a strategic posture whose insolvency is exposed, gradually or in several disastrous episodes, over the coming decades. Left to its own natural momentum, the present trajectory of the U.S. strategic posture is likely to end in generalized loss of confidence, direct challenge, or perhaps even conflict. The question for the United States now is whether it responds to this emerging reality, or continues doggedly trying to ignore it.

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41. The author is indebted to a conversation with Robert Keohane for raising the connection to the concept of conditional preferences.
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