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>>America's Role in the World

What does national security mean in the 21st century?

THE WORLD BEARS little resemblance to the way it was in 1991, when the Soviet Union fell and the cold war ended. Where the world used to have two “superpowers,”—the Soviet Union and the United States—the end of the cold war created what many observers called a “unipolar” world in which the United States was the clear leader, able to bend most events to its will. But that moment has passed.

The U.S. Director of National Intelligence issued a report in late 2008 that assessed where things stand and where things are likely to go over the next two decades. One conclusion of this comprehensive study is that

the United States “will remain the single most powerful country but will be less dominant.”

Examples of less dominance are everywhere. China has gone from being a very large nation to being an economic powerhouse. India’s economy, as well as its influence on the world stage, has grown rapidly. Pakistan is now strategically vital.

Threats are becoming more global in nature, too. Climate change (global warming), pandemics, and resource depletion face countries without regard to superpower status or military strength. Many of these threats require response, but no one nation can act alone.

>>National Security Means Safeguarding the United States

As wars rage in Iraq and Afghanistan, we continue to face the threat of terrorism, as well as threats from Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan. At the same time, traditional adversaries like Russia and China are gaining power. Our most important goal is to safeguard the people of the United States.

Our global objective must always be to maintain the safety of the United States and its citizens. We must guard against threats to national security above all. This means we must give national security the highest priority and recognize that terrorism and unstable nations are our greatest threats, while not ignoring conventional threats either.



EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

Guard against threats to national security.

- Because national security is the most basic function of any government, it should receive the highest priority.
- Recognize that terrorism from al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden and unstable nations are the primary threats to U.S. and global security.
- Commit enough troops to make sure Afghanistan never becomes a safe haven for terrorism.
- Assertively deal with the nuclear threats posed by Iran and North Korea.
- Build up the military and missile defense capabilities to safeguard against threats from Russia and China.

SOME CONSEQUENCES TO CONSIDER

If we pursue Option One, we might face these consequences:

- Building up our military may cause others to see us as the world's police officer.
- Focusing only on military threats may limit our ability to pursue global issues or cause us to miss other dangers, such as economic threats.
- Combating terrorism may lead the United States into untenable situations like Afghanistan, destabilize other nations, or force us into relationships with undemocratic governments.
- Our only objective in Afghanistan should be defeating al-Qaeda, not trying to make that country a secure democracy.
- Assertively dealing with nuclear threats from Iran or North Korea may lead the United States or them to take risky actions.
- Russia or China may feel threatened and respond by building military forces more than they otherwise would.
- Russia or China may not pose as great of a short- or long-term military threat as in the past.

>>National Security Depends on Putting Our Economic House in Order

The economic crisis makes it clear that the United States cannot long remain a superpower if it is the world's largest debtor nation and runs huge budget deficits. With such significant economic issues facing us, we need to focus on eliminating our staggering public indebtedness and improving the balance of trade. That means spending less on the military and reducing the amount of money that flows overseas.



EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

Reduce national debt by spending less on the military and by improving the balance of trade.

- Cut back on military spending.
- Reduce U.S. military presence around the world, by withdrawing from some of the many nations where we have troops and bases.
- Reduce military and nonmilitary assistance to other countries.
- Promote free-trade agreements with other nations as a way of adapting to globalization.
- Coordinate U.S. economic policy with other nations to ensure the world does not slide into another Great Depression.

SOME CONSEQUENCES TO CONSIDER

If we pursue Option Two, we might face these consequences:

- Russia and China may build up their strength and outstrip us militarily or in global influence.
- Cutting back on military spending will harm many communities.
- Reducing our military presence may mean that the United States loses leverage over the actions of other nations.
- Cutting foreign aid will make it harder for allies like Israel and Pakistan and for impoverished nations that depend on U.S. aid.
- Free trade without worker and environmental protections could cost U.S. jobs and damage the environment.
- The United States could lose its economic autonomy if we coordinate our policy with other nations.

>>National Security Means Recognizing That Global Threats Are Our Greatest Challenge



Our most urgent challenge is to address the long-term threats that endanger humanity. In the 21st century, we need to rethink what “national security” means because the greatest threats facing the United States also endanger other countries, including the risk of global nuclear annihilation, environmental devastation and climate change (global warming), pandemics, overpopulation and food shortages, and the depletion of natural resources.

Today’s challenges face everyone on the planet, not just one nation. We must take a leadership role in working with other nations in a collaborative way to address long-term threats to humanity and increase foreign aid so other nations can also address such threats.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

Work with other nations to address the long-term threats that endanger humanity.

- Work multilaterally with other nations on security issues, much as the United States did in Desert Storm.
- Take a leadership role to combat climate change and other environmental threats by actively engaging with other nations, while massively investing in “green” technology.
- Work with other nations to dramatically reduce and secure nuclear weapons globally.
- Develop partnerships with other nations to combat global problems, such as pandemics and resource depletion.
- Work more closely with Russia and China to address security concerns in Iran and North Korea.
- Stand up for, but don’t insist on, our ideals when dealing with other nations.

SOME CONSEQUENCES TO CONSIDER

If we pursue Option Three, we might face these consequences:

- Other nations may not go along because of the recent loss of U.S. prestige and this country’s economic weakness.
- International agreements to address environmental threats may penalize and cost the United States more than other nations.
- Some scientists say that global warming is not caused by humans and is cyclical, so we should not waste the effort trying to combat it.
- Slashing the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal may diminish our ability to address security threats.
- To significantly address pandemics, the depletion of natural resources, and other global issues might require more resources than the country can possibly afford.
- Russia’s and China’s price to cooperate might be very high.
- Not standing up for human rights may be seen as weak and could endanger the safety of democratic movements in totalitarian countries.