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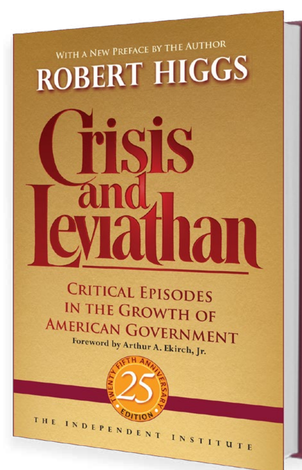

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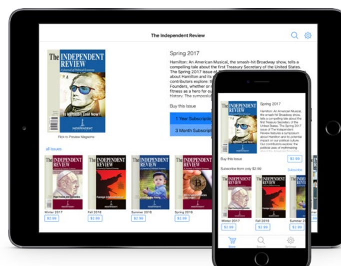

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“Independent Internationalism” and the Military Forces Needed for It

Ivan Eland

Many security analysts of a libertarian bent have advocated a grand strategy of “restraint,” “military restraint,” “strategic independence,” or “independent internationalism.” Such a tack desires to resume the traditional foreign policy of the republic as initiated by the nation’s Founders and followed for the most part up until the Spanish-American War at the turn of the twentieth century. Even after that war, the policy recurred until the presidential administration of Woodrow Wilson and World War I and again between the two world wars, finally giving way after World War II to the much more aggressive foreign policy of a globe-girdling superpower. Unlike the post–World War II interventionist orgy, this traditional grand strategy usually erred on the side of staying out of most foreign conflicts.

The nation’s Founders created a republic and knew that getting enmeshed in foreign wars, especially those of Europe, was the quickest way to lose it. A famous quote by James Madison should demonstrate the Founders’ antimilitaristic attitudes and suspicions that standing armies used to fight wars would usurp American citizens’ liberty: “Of all the enemies of public liberty, war is perhaps the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other” (1795, 491–92). In both U.S. and world history, war is the most prominent cause of expanding government

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power, especially presidential power, in both the security and nonsecurity realms (that is, increased government interference with civil liberties and in the domestic economic and social spheres).

Although most libertarians recognize the state's role in defending the country from foreign threats, some libertarians also realize the problems at home and abroad that excessive government military meddling abroad usually generate, which some of their brethren and conservatives and liberals have forgotten. These modern-day carriers of the torch for a resumption of the Founders' traditional foreign policy have called it by the aforementioned names. Eugene Gholz, a professor at Dartmouth, popularized the term *restraint*. Ted Galen Carpenter of the Cato Institute coined the term *strategic independence* (1992, 7–10). Before them, President Herbert Hoover was known for using the term *independent internationalism* (Wilson 1975, 168).

Of course, it is a matter of preference which term one uses, but all of them are aimed at conveying a sparing use of government force or coercion against other countries and groups—that is, doing so only when U.S. vital interests really hang in the balance. To me, the term *restraint* is not descriptive enough, and the term *military restraint* could imply that the nation is sacrificing the attainment of some desirable objective by not using force—that is, it seems like the foreign-policy equivalent of going on a strict diet for no valid medical reason. In any event, the latter term certainly seems to define the traditional U.S. foreign policy as merely the foil to a policy of military interventionism, which is actually the true aberration in American history. *Strategic independence* is probably the most descriptive term, but it contains a bit of professional jargon with which the common citizen might not be familiar.

Leave it to a politician, Herbert Hoover, to popularize the most easily understood positive term for the policy—*independent internationalism*. This term implies not only that the United States should remain detached from permanent and entangling alliances and the coercion or wars they can bring but also that the United States should be involved in the world, thus combating the pejorative term *isolationist* that neoconservatives and liberal hawks alike fling at libertarians. Of course, a libertarian foreign policy, with emphasis on free-flowing private cultural and economic interactions by American citizens abroad, is hardly "isolationist." Libertarians object only to unnecessary government-centric use of force against other countries or groups. In fact, interventionists are the ones who usually isolate other nations by imposing economic sanctions or war on them. War is the most isolating condition of all—smashing production, economic interactions, health, nutrition, and civilization itself and cutting the target country off from commercial and financial transactions abroad, including from the attacking nation.

Some libertarians might chafe at using a term associated with Herbert Hoover. It is true that Hoover probably turned a run-of-the-mill recession into the Great Depression by using more government intervention in the economy than had any prior president. An influential adviser to Franklin Delano Roosevelt even admitted that FDR's New Deal merely followed the precedents originally set by Hoover (Wilson 1975, 158). Yet

at the same time that Hoover was wrecking the economy, he had the most independent, responsible, and peaceful foreign policy of the twentieth century (and so far up through the twenty-first). Thus, he intervened abroad less than he did at home.

It was not a perfect foreign policy by any means, but it eschewed military and economic coercion, achieved international arms control, and improved relations with most nations, including those in Latin America, the traditional U.S. playground under even responsible presidents such as Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge (Robinson and Bornet 1975, 97–108, 196–203). So, in Hoover's honor, I use the term *independent internationalism* to describe returning to the traditional U.S. foreign policy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Whatever libertarian foreign-policy writers, including me, have called the policy, they have explored and analyzed in great depth what the truly vital interests of the United States are and are not. However, they have paid less attention to the military forces that would be needed for variants of such a "more humble" foreign policy. That is what this article tries to do.

Three Force Options for Independent Internationalism

Here I put forth three options of military force structure to satisfy varying shades of the grand strategy of independent internationalism—each with a different level of ambition in the national interests being secured. However, all are a far cry from the current gargantuan and excessive military needed to execute the costly (in money and lives), incoherent, and contradictory grand strategy of selected world hegemony (primacy) practiced by the post–World War II American superpower.[1] In 2015, the United States was spending more on defense than what the next seven highest spenders on security expended combined (Peterson Foundation 2016). The American Empire is overextended—accounting for more than one-third of the world's military spending (Tully 2015) but for only about 16 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) (in relation to Purchasing Power Parity dollars) (Statista 2016)—and is over $19 trillion in debt ("U.S. National Debt Clock" n.d.). The grand strategy of independent internationalism is designed to dramatically reduce spending on defense, which would also need to be combined with drastic cuts in domestic spending, to allow national economic renewal and a shrinkage of the nation's massive public debt. All other indices of national power—military, political, and social—derive from a

1. The word *selected* is used here because the United States once in a while avoids meddling in a large-scale conflict that one might at least assume an interventionist superpower couldn't pass up—for example, the Rwandan civil war in 1995 that left between five hundred thousand and one million people dead. On the other hand, the United States has often used military force in conflicts in small countries relatively unimportant to U.S. security or national interests—such as Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Lebanon, Grenada, Libya, Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Serbia, and Iraq, to name but a few. Instead of *selected hegemony,* Barry Posen uses the term *liberal hegemony* (2014, 5–6), but the veneer of liberalism in U.S. military interventions is often belied by other more important underlying and rather illiberal motives.

robust economy. Such national renewal could begin by adopting one of the following three force structures to carry out independent internationalism.

Option One: The Constitutional Choice

The Constitution allows the federal government to provide only for the "common defence," but the government has continuously violated this stipulation by projecting offensive force all over the post–World War II world, thus creating an informal empire. This empire differs from formal empires, such as the Roman and British Empires, and consists of one-sided U.S.-dominated alliances, hundreds of overseas military bases to defend those allies, and profligate military interventions to police the globe. All of the options discussed in this paper abandon these three pillars of empire, but the first option also restores the U.S. military to a constitutional footing. Option one is the most modest choice of the three military choices offered for effectuating independent internationalism. See table 1 for the explication of a constitutional force structure for the U.S. Armed Forces.

Astonishingly, a look at the U.S. Constitution's text leads to the conclusion that a large part of the current U.S. military is unconstitutional. As noted earlier, the nation's Founders had a well-documented suspicion of standing armies, and the text

Table 1
A Constitutional Force Structure

Force Category	Quantity
Navy	
Active aircraft carriers	0
Reserve aircraft carriers	0
Multipurpose destroyers	30
Attack submarines	25
Nuclear-armed ballistic-missile submarines	3
Marines	
Active division equivalents	1
Reserve division equivalents	0
Army	
Active division equivalents	0
National Guard division equivalents	8
Air Force	
Active fighter wings	0
Air Guard fighter wings	8
Heavy bombers	0

of the Constitution reflects that suspicion. The Constitution authorizes Congress to "*raise* and support *Armies,* but no Appropriation of Money to that Use shall be for a longer Term than two Years" (Art. I, sec. 8, emphasis added). Both the use of the terms *raise* and the plural *armies* as well as the time limit on funding for any armies created show that the Founders did not mean for a single permanent standing army to remain during peacetime. Contrast this terminology with the Constitution's much different language governing the navy. The Congress was authorized "to provide and maintain a Navy" with none of the previous qualifiers—indicating that a permanent navy was to be maintained. The Founders astutely concluded that standing armies, not navies, had the potential to quash citizens' liberties.

Of course, many analysts—most of whom have a vested interest in the current system—would retort that the Constitution was written in the eighteenth century for a far different world than the one we inhabit today. First, however, this response ignores the fact that the rule of law is central to a republic and that if circumstances have changed so significantly since 1787 that a standing army is needed, it would probably not be hard to pass a constitutional amendment establishing one—especially since the public has become accustomed to the aberrant world policing that the U.S. government has done since World War II. Furthermore, in contrast to the faltering popular confidence in other American institutions, the military—despite its losses in Afghanistan and Iraq—is still held in high public esteem. Second, if the policy of being the global cop—which is never ending, expensive, futile, and counterproductive to U.S. security (given the potential for severe blowback terrorism in retaliation for it)—were abandoned, it is not clear that a need for a standing army would exist, especially if the training and readiness of the Army National Guard (the modern equivalent to constitutionally approved militias) were augmented.

Given that fixed-wing aircraft were not invented until the beginning of the twentieth century, the air force of course also is not mentioned in the Constitution. Up until 1947, that service was part of the army. Thus, under this option, no air force would exist. All land-based aircraft would be housed in the Air National Guard.

Although the navy is mentioned in the Constitution, the Marine Corps is not. However, marines have been part of navies since the inception of the republic, so this option includes marines as a rapid-reaction, special-operations force. This small force would do raids—for example, hunting and killing any terrorists that do not stop attacking the United States after its policy of global hegemony has ended. Most of the terrorism against U.S. targets now results from retaliation for American intervention in foreign lands, which the current policy of primacy promotes.

So what can you do with a military force that has a navy and a marine corps but no standing army or air force? Defend the country, that's what! Since World War II, Americans have become used to a military that projects power offensively around the globe to impose U.S. dominance on faraway places unimportant to American security or any commonsense conception of truly vital U.S. interests. Of course, this grand strategy of primacy is expensive in terms of both lives and money, contributes significantly to

imperial overextension and likely eventual national decline, and actually contravenes what is supposed to be a very basic goal of any government—safeguarding the home country's people, territory, freedom of action, and way of life. Profligate meddling in the affairs of other countries makes unneeded enemies, which results in blowback terrorism (à la the attacks on September 11, 2001); aside from the somnolent post–Cold War nuclear threat, terrorism has become the only threat to the American homeland.

All three of the options in this paper would minimize the threat of such retaliatory terrorism, but this constitutional option would defend the country, and only the country, for the least amount of resources expended. Under this option, the Department of Defense would not need to be renamed the "Department of Offense" or the "Department of Defense of Other Countries," as it should be called under the current strategy of primacy.

The United States probably has the most intrinsically secure position of any great power in world history—separated from the world's conflict zones by huge ocean moats and bordering weak and friendly neighbors on land. Thus, the major conventional threat to U.S. territory likely would have to come from the sea. As Normandy and other amphibious assaults have shown, however, it is challenging to conduct such assaults across small bodies of water, let alone vast oceans. Furthermore, amphibious assaults are one of the most difficult military actions to undertake, and advancing technology is making them even tougher. The United States has not conducted a major amphibious assault since the one at Inchon during the Korean War, and the proliferation of mines, cruise missiles, and satellite reconnaissance may even have rendered such assaults obsolete. In any event, for the unlikely scenario of an amphibious invasion of or attack on the United States, the U.S. Navy would be the first line of defense.

Under this option, the U.S. Navy would do only coastal defense and nothing more; the Coast Guard would be eliminated (as it would be even in the other two more robust force options). The force would not even guard U.S. seaborne trade. The operative principle here is that American businesses profit from foreign trade, so they also should need to assume the risks of conducting such commerce. Thus, the hidden subsidy provided to American international business—by the U.S. government through protection of trade routes against state-sponsored and independent piracy—would be eliminated.

To do coastal defense, the navy could be much smaller than the 291 battle-force ships in its current inventory. All eleven big-deck aircraft carriers and the nine amphibious helicopter/Harrier carriers for the marines could be decommissioned. The primary current purpose of these forces is to intimidate by showing the flag overseas and projecting power offensively when desired (which has been often under the grand strategy of primacy). Under this option, the conventional power of the navy would consist primarily of two types of ships—multipurpose destroyers and nuclear-powered attack submarines—to intercept and kill any amphibious flotilla approaching

the American coastline or to deal with attack or harassment from the sea by smaller forces of adversary ships or submarines. Although it would be hard to mine the long U.S. coastline, a hostile power might try to mine key ports to constrain U.S. military and commercial shipping at the source, but even a reduced U.S. Navy could intercept and destroy such mine-laying vessels (Air Guard air-to-air fighters could deal with any foreign aircraft-seeding mines from above).

To guard the U.S. coastline from invasion or attack from the sea, the U.S. Navy would retain thirty Arleigh Burke destroyers (down from sixty-two now), the most capable surface combatant ever mass-produced, and twenty-five nuclear attack submarines (down from fifty-five now), consisting of ten Los Angeles–class, three Seawolf-class, and twelve Virginia-class vessels—all three classes the best submarines ever constructed. The attack submarine is probably the most powerful naval weapon ever produced and, among other developments such as antiship cruise missiles and satellite reconnaissance, has made aircraft carriers, amphibious ships, and really all surface ships vulnerable to attack from below (and from the air). In addition, if the United States ever would need to take offensive action—say, to knock out terrorist training camps somewhere—both the destroyers and submarines can fire accurate long-range land-attack Tomahawk cruise missiles. The navy would also retain thirteen smaller coastal defense ships and eleven mine-clearing ships in case some nation were to try to mine one or more U.S. ports (options two and three would also retain these small but important ships). No dedicated military sealift ships would be needed because U.S. ground forces would not be used to defend or attack countries overseas. If sealift were needed for some unforeseen scenario, commercial sealift ships would be an acceptable substitute.

In addition to protection offered by the country's vast distances from conflict zones and the very capable remaining conventional naval forces, U.S. nuclear forces would deter any attack on the United States by sea or by long-range air or missile attack. Right now, the U.S. "overkill" nuclear force has 1,550 long-range strategic warheads in a triad of land-based long-range bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and sea-launched ballistic missiles based on fourteen large Trident nuclear ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs, nicknamed "boomers"). Because this option retains only a minimum nuclear deterrent, air force bombers and ICBMs would be decommissioned to save money.

As the navy loves to say, the Trident SSBN is the most powerful weapon system ever conceived by humans. For the United States to have 240 strategic warheads at sea at any one time as a minimum invulnerable nuclear deterrent, only three of the current fourteen SSBNs would need to be retained. Each would have two crews and twenty-four Trident missiles, each with 5 D-5 warheads—thus providing 120 warheads per submarine. With one vessel always deployed in the Atlantic, one always deployed in the Pacific, and one always in port for overhaul, the minimum invulnerable deterrent requirement would be satisfied.

This option aims to have only the minimum nuclear force needed to deter both a conventional attack and a nuclear attack on the United States. The force doesn't need

to be able to completely annihilate any threatening country or its target set, as the current U.S. nuclear force can do many times over, but it needs only to be able to inflict unacceptable damage on an adversary nation's home territory to deter it from attacking the United States in the first place. For decades, instead of getting into a nuclear arms race with the United States and Soviet Union, China wisely and successfully adopted the low-cost strategy of retaining only a minimum nuclear deterrent—about twenty land-based ICBMs. The Chinese were thus able to save money and build their economy, the root of any nation's political, economic, cultural, and social power; the United States currently needs such national renewal. Because land-based bombers and ICBMs are more vulnerable to attack than a sea-based minimum deterrent, however, this option would scrap these systems in favor of keeping a limited number of SSBNs as the remaining U.S. nuclear deterrent. All battlefield nuclear arms, usually used to help deter attacks on America's overseas allies, could also be decommissioned (options two and three would also decommission these battlefield weapons).

Under a prior Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, four of the original eighteen SSBNs have already been converted to SSGN conventional cruise missiles. Given the lesser need to attack foreign targets with cruise missiles, and given the potent cruise-missile capability of remaining surface ships and other attack submarines, these ships also could be decommissioned.

As noted earlier, the marines would give up their offensive amphibious assault mission (it may now be obsolete, anyway, given the proliferation of mines, cruise missiles, and satellite reconnaissance to a greater number of potential adversaries). However, the marines could retain one active division out of the current four (three active and one reserve) for rare special-operations-style raids and air-assault missions via helicopters, perhaps to capture or kill a terrorist who just hasn't gotten the message that the United States is no longer intervening in the Middle East, the Islamic world, or other volatile regions. Also, the highly trained Navy SEALs would be retained for specialized counterterrorism missions. Both of these forces could be taken to the theater by military cargo airlifters housed in the Air National Guard. The marines would give up their fixed-wing aircraft (while retaining their helicopters), and the Air Guard would supply any air support they needed.

With these rapid-reaction missions housed in the remaining light marine forces, there would be no need for light army airborne or air-assault forces. Thus, since the ground and air forces retained would be used only for the defense of the country—and not for the projection of offensive power at a moment's notice or for long campaigns overseas—they could be safely housed in the National Guard and Air Guard. The former would have eight heavier divisions, and the latter would have eight air wings (only five Air Guard air wings currently exist, but three active wings could be converted into cheaper guard wings). Also, no need would exist for long-range bombers for conventional long-range or intercontinental offensive bombing runs; thus, the expensive force of B-1s, B-2s, and B-52s could be scrapped.

In short, this option would essentially make the United States a much more capable Switzerland with vast moats. U.S. territory, citizens, and the American way of life are really all the U.S. government is allowed to defend according to the antimilitaristic U.S. Constitution. Interventionists use the cliché that the world has become more interdependent to argue that every conflict in the world, no matter how small, affects U.S. security; in fact, the opposite is true. In the communications and transportation realm, the world has become more interdependent; yet in the security realm, nuclear weapons, virulent nationalism, and the proliferation of potent arms worldwide—all giving potential attackers and invaders justifiable caution—have reduced cross-border aggression to new lows. Cross-border aggression is more threatening to U.S. security than internal civil wars. Thus, such developments are good for American security but not for U.S. meddling abroad and thus provide further justification for military options with a more defensive flavor.

As a result, the United States could and should abrogate its many permanent and entangling Cold War alliances around the world, which are now outdated and impede U.S. flexibility and independence in foreign policy. (In fact, in the wake of World War II, during which the U.S. government developed nuclear weapons, the United States created these alliances just when it didn't need them for security; by doing so, it abandoned the Founders' wise suspicion of permanent, entangling alliances and signed up to protect many other countries with the imprudent global policy "Pax Americana.") With the abrogation of those alliances, the United States could abandon the hundreds of military bases around the globe that usually protect wealthy allies, thus decommissioning the forces stationed there.

Option Two: Defense of Narrowly Construed Vital Interests

This option, deviating from what the text of the Constitution allows, would have a small active standing army and air force during peacetime, would have slightly more forces than option one, would combat the slightly more robust risk from state-sponsored terrorism, and would protect U.S. overseas trade. See table 2 for the force structure needed to defend narrowly construed vital interests.

With the largely defensive policy of any of the three options, fewer states will likely feel the need to sponsor anti-U.S. retaliatory terrorism. And a danger exists in retaining this larger active force: if American politicians use the limited air force or light and strategically mobile U.S. Army and Marine ground forces to battle terrorists or their state sponsors even when the latter have not initially focused their attacks on the United States, the terrorists and their sponsors may begin to shift their focus to the United States. Thus, retaining more military forces does not necessarily make American citizens, territory, and way of life safer; in fact, if the politicians behave like Madeleine Albright, Bill Clinton's secretary of state, and want to use the military just because the capability is there, Americans may be less safe. For example, when shortly after taking office in 1981 President Ronald Reagan began harassing and attacking

Table 2
A Defense of Narrowly Construed Vital Interests

Force Category	Quantity
Navy	
Active aircraft carriers	0
Reserve aircraft carriers	0
Multipurpose destroyers	45
Attack submarines	25
Nuclear-armed ballistic-missile submarines	5
Marines	
Active division equivalents	1
Reserve division equivalents	0
Army	
Active division equivalents	2
National Guard division equivalents	8
Air Force	
Active fighter wings	2
Air Guard fighter wings	8
Heavy bombers	50

Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, Gaddafi redirected his terrorist attacks to focus them on hitting U.S. targets. More recently, the same phenomenon seems to be occurring since the United States and France began attacking the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Also under this option, the U.S. Navy, in addition to defending America from any attack from the sea, would protect American overseas trade from any predatory nation-states and pirates (for example, those in Somalia). Thus, to guard such overseas lines of communication, the navy would be given fifteen more powerful Arleigh Burke multipurpose surface combatants, bringing its total to forty-five. The navy would again retain twenty-five attack submarines to protect America's coastlines but also to implicitly deter any foreign nation's thoughts about interdicting U.S. commerce by creating the potent ability to do the same to the foreign nation's seaborne trade. Again, no aircraft carriers or amphibious ships would be needed for this only slightly wider mission.

However, this expanded mission should not become an excuse for U.S. Navy ships to "show the flag" all over the world to "reassure" friendly nations and allegedly carry out "general-deterrence" missions. If a problem develops in a region of the world—say with Somali pirates—the United States could temporarily arrange for U.S. ships to use local naval facilities in a nearby friendly country but not to create or retain

any permanent overseas American naval bases. That friendly nation's commerce might also benefit from having the powerful U.S. Navy helping to defend against such attacks on shipping, thus giving the country an incentive to temporarily provide such facilities.

In this option, a slightly more robust nuclear deterrent would be provided—two SSBNS each on deployment in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and one in overhaul. This five-ship invulnerable boomer force—providing about five hundred warheads at sea at any one time (four deployed submarines, each with twenty-four missiles carrying five warheads each)—could hit the target set traditionally assumed to obliterate a major power, such as Russia or China. Again, because the U.S. policy is still largely defensive under this option, all four SSGN dedicated submarine cruise-missile carriers would be decommissioned, and the substantial cruise-missile capability of the twenty-five attack submarines and forty-five Arleigh Burke destroyers could handle the rare need for offensive missions to attack state sponsors of terrorism in the developing world.

To further deal with such state sponsors of terrorism, this option adds two division equivalents of light, quick-reaction, active army forces to the eight heavier ground-force division equivalents in the National Guard of the first option. One of the active division equivalents would be light infantry, and the other would be air mobile with helicopters. Also, the one marine division in option one similarly would be available for such missions. If any of these division equivalents were sent overseas to perform antiterrorist raids, they would be transported to the theater by Air Guard airlifters or, with the luxury of more deployment time, by leased commercial sealift. However, the commitment of such light ground forces overseas should be rare and held to a minimum. If a terrorist-sponsoring country needs to be hit to stymie such attacks coming from its territory, the initially successful attack on Afghanistan after September 11, 2001 should be used as a model. The deployment of U.S. ground forces was held to a minimum by using mainly local ground forces and having U.S. Special Operations and light ground forces call in U.S. air strikes.

Therefore, option two also adds two active air force wings to the eight reserve wings in the Air Guard in option one. To attack terrorists or their state sponsors or to support army operations in doing so, these aircraft would operate out of air bases temporarily provided by friendly countries. As in option one, the marines would give up fixed-wing aircraft but retain their helicopters, and the air force or Air Guard would provide any air support needed. The preference for using ever more potent air power instead of U.S. ground forces would be fostered by keeping 50 long-range bombers out of the current excess inventory of 130 aircraft (16 B-2s and 34 B-1s would be retained, while 36 B-1s and 44 B-52s would be decommissioned). Heavy bombers could also help defend American trade at sea from any hostile foreign navy or pirates.

In sum, option two would augment the forces of option one to provide a small force of active ground and air power to retaliate against or preempt state-sponsored

terrorism, to provide more naval forces to deter or protect against attacks on U.S. trade, and to provide a more robust invulnerable nuclear force at sea that could obliterate the key targets in a major power. Once again, because the United States has nuclear weapons, broad ocean moats, and weak and friendly neighbors, it will need no permanent formal or informal alliances to ensure its security and will recognize that outdated Cold War alliances stifle independence in policy and might drag the United States into an unwanted conflict—for example, war with China over the nonstrategic island of Taiwan. Once again, the abrogation of such alliances allows the hundreds of U.S. military bases worldwide, which support such allies, to be abandoned and the forces housed there to be decommissioned.

Drawbacks do exist with having this larger and more capable force, however: the need to preempt terrorists might be used as an excuse for military interventions with ulterior purposes, and the protection of trade might be used as a cover for "show the flag" missions of intimidation or military coercion. In other words, if given a bigger force, politicians often might be tempted to use it for offensive missions beyond just defending the country and its commerce. The next even more robust force posture has even more potential for such abuse.

Option Three: Acting as a Balancer of Last Resort

This option, the most robust force for a posture of independent internationalism, allows less independence than the other two options. As in the other two options, the United States would terminate outdated Cold War alliances, overseas military bases, and profligate foreign intervention. Under this option, however, the United States would act as a balancer of last resort to prevent a hegemonic power from gaining control over important areas of the Eurasian continent—for example, as Nazi Germany attempted during World War II or as the Soviet Union had the potential to do during the Cold War.

With the demise of the Soviet Union, this scenario has been rendered very unlikely. Even if China continues to rise and also becomes more aggressive, it is likely to become dominant only in East Asia. In contrast to the Soviet Union, which spanned Europe and Asia and could project at least some force in all directions, the Chinese will have trouble projecting power to the open ocean even in East Asia. Independent nations control many offshore islands that limit China's access to the sea. In addition, the rapid growth of China's economy, now capitalist but still with much government involvement, may very well slow in the future, as Japan's state-heavy economy has done in recent times.[2] Japan's rigid economy initially experienced rapid economic growth but has been unable to adapt to changing times; China's economy may prove equally inflexible.

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2. See Roy C. Smith's essay "Is China the Next Japan?" in this issue of *The Independent Review.*

Were a mythical great power to gain control of or undue influence over important parts of Eurasia, the traditional thinking is that this power could use all the industry, technology, human capital, and resources conquered (other continents just don't measure up in these categories) to make life miserable for the still faraway United States. That may be true, but the argument also ignores the significant costs of subjugation, control, and administration that would most likely overextend the hegemonic power, even without the United States trying to prevent its expansion. An example of such fatal overextension was the Soviet Union's support of socialist economic basket cases in the developing world. Also, any hegemonic Eurasian power likely would still profit economically from trade and financial transactions with the United States and so probably would hesitate to put those transactions at risk.

At any rate, this option tries to help wealthy U.S. allies in either Europe or Asia to balance against such a hegemonic takeover. In contrast to the Cold War and continuing to the present, the United States would not take the lead in defending countries that are now rich enough to defend themselves. France, Germany, and the United Kingdom each has a GDP (at market exchange rates) individually greater than Russia's (Posen 2014, 88). Combined, the European Union countries have a GDP roughly equivalent to that of the United States.

China's major neighbors—Japan, India, Russia, South Korea, Australia, Indonesia, Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Vietnam, and New Zealand—together have a combined GDP greater than that of China. In the future, this advantage may erode if China's rapid growth continues, but Japan, Taiwan, and Australia at least have the advantage that they are defending islands across significant expanses of water. Amphibious assaults across even small bodies of water are difficult (for example, the attack on D-Day across even the narrow English Channel was challenging). Thus, each of these island nations does not need to outmatch China in military spending to forestall an invasion but just to use a porcupine strategy of being able to inflict enough damage on Chinese forces to deter any such attack. Such countries could also acquire longer-range missiles that could hit China to deter any air or missile attack from the Chinese. Finally, instead of relying on the United States to defend them, these Asian countries could form a regional alliance to balance against a rising China.

Thus, if the United States were to decide that a hegemonic power might possibly dominate Eurasia, it would set itself up as the second line of defense for the European Union or a new Asian equivalent. Unlike its policy now, the United States would rely on the wealthy countries of these regions to provide the bulk of the military forces to balance against a potential hegemonic power on a day-to-day basis, but the U.S. military would act as a potent supplement if needed only in extraordinary circumstances. This option would require U.S. friends to do more for their own defense; with the United States no longer providing a free ride for them, they would have the incentive to do so.

However, the United States would need to abrogate existing alliances in Europe and East Asia that require—formally or informally—U.S. intervention if an allied state is (or states are) attacked. The United States must have flexibility to decide where and under what circumstances to intervene militarily, something it does not have now.

But shouldn't the United States also intervene in the Middle East to safeguard cheap oil supplies from the Persian Gulf? In my book *No War for Oil: U.S. Dependency and the Middle East* (Eland 2011), I debunk the need for stationing expensive U.S. military forces, either permanently or temporarily, in the Gulf region to safeguard U.S. oil supplies. For starters, oil is no more strategic than other key commodities and products needed for war; the United States also produces enough oil several times over to run its military during wartime, and U.S. production is soaring because of new fracking technology. As for its economy, the United States gets only about 20 percent of its oil imports from the Persian Gulf region. Even if this percentage were greater and a war occurred in the Middle East, a worldwide market exists for the product, with plenty of incentives to transport it around and through the conflict. Even if some oil production were impaired by any war, increases in the worldwide price would naturally spur other producers to increase their production. In the worst case, even if the war were to cause world production to be reduced for a time, industrial economies—in the absence of government price controls that create lines for gas—would be, as they are today, remarkably resilient to oil price spikes (Eland 2011, 112–14, 134–35).

Although the Pentagon purposefully doesn't publish the numbers, defending the Persian Gulf accounts for an estimated 15 to 20 percent of the U.S. defense budget—probably well more than $100 billion per year (not even including the exorbitant costs of the long war in Iraq) (Posen 2014, 107–8). This amount is much greater than the estimated value of U.S. oil imports from the Gulf—only slightly more than $20 billion in 2015.[3] Given this analysis and the lack of credible threats to the oil, one can only conclude that the biggest threat to oil supplies (of other countries) is the excessive U.S. armed presence in the Gulf. Perhaps the real reason for such a heavy post–Cold War U.S. military footprint is to keep the U.S. finger on the perceived oil jugular of other nations, including China. This fact has not gone unnoticed in China as that country desperately but unnecessarily searches the world over for alternative oil supplies.

Thus, the United States should end this needless coercive presence in the Gulf and decommission the forces allocated for that mission. In sum, for option three, enough U.S. forces would be retained to assist allies in repelling any potential hegemon in either Europe or East Asia (the forces needed to fulfill options one and two are lesser included cases).

3. This estimate is based on a calculation of 270,527,000 barrels of oil imported into the United States from the Persian Gulf during the first six months of 2015 times two times $40 per barrel (the current oil price on December 9, 2015) (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2015). The oil price would need to rise greatly for the value of U.S. oil imports from the Persian Gulf to even come close to equaling the amount spent by the U.S. government to deter or defend against an unlikely region-wide war that could significantly curtail oil production there.

Table 3
Balancer-of-Last-Resort Force Structure

Force Category	Quantity
Navy	
Active aircraft carriers	4
Reserve aircraft carriers	2
Destroyers	60
Attack submarines	25
Ballistic-missile submarines	9
Marines	
Active division equivalents	1
Reserve division equivalents	1
Army	
Active division equivalents	5
National Guard division equivalents	8
Air Force	
Active fighter wings	5
Air Guard fighter wings	8
Heavy bombers	86

To fulfill this maximum goal of fighting one major theater war to help defend friendly nations in Europe or East Asia from a potential regional hegemon, the forces listed in table 3 would be needed.[4]

For Operation Desert Shield in 1990–91, the effort to defend Saudi Arabia after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, four and two-thirds divisions were needed. Seven and two-thirds divisions were needed in Operation Desert Storm to rollback Saddam's invasion, but the option-three force is not designed for such an exacting and aggressive mission. Yet in 2003, with a weaker Iraq, better military technology, and the realization that ground forces could be smaller because of enhanced air power, only three divisions were needed to invade and conquer Iraq. Thus, with an active five divisions (down from ten now), the option-three ground force would have plenty of firepower to be the balancer of last resort against a now mythical potential hegemon in either the European or East Asian theater. The option-three force would

4. I proposed a force similar to that of option three in a book on defense policy published some years ago (Eland 2001, 99–131). In the fifteen years since that book was published, no great change has occurred in the American geostrategic position, the country's truly vital interests, or the threats to those interests. The only major change since then has been continued improvement in U.S. military forces and weapons vis-à-vis potential adversaries, an improvement that has, if anything, reduced the quantities of forces required to fulfill this objective. Thus, this option is a conservative estimate of the forces needed to carry out this mission.

consist of two armored division equivalents, two mechanized infantry division equivalents, and one hybrid airborne/air mobile (helicopters) division equivalent. If needed in dire circumstances, eight heavy National Guard division equivalents could reinforce the five active division equivalents. Under no circumstances would any of the active or guard division equivalents be stationed overseas during peacetime.

Also, one marine active and one marine reserve division equivalent would be kept in the force as a supplement to the army and Army National Guard or for any emergency forced entry needed to acquire a port or base of operations in hostile territory. These two division equivalents would be allowed helicopters and amphibious lift but would not need fixed-wing aircraft; because this option retains navy aircraft carriers, the navy would provide air support for any marine amphibious landing. When the marines supplement the army, the Air Guard also could supply air support for them.

Five active air force fighter wings and eight Air Guard wings would provide air support for the five army division equivalents and eight Army National Guard division equivalents. To arrive at the option-three force, from the current eleven active wings and five Air Guard wings, three active wings would be transferred to the guard, and the other three would be decommissioned. Of the 130 current heavy bombers, 86 would be retained (16 of the more modern B-2s and 70 of the B-1s), and 44 (the ancient B-52s) would be decommissioned.

Barry Posen says that of the eleven aircraft carriers currently in the navy, only four, with the advance of technology, would be needed to fight a war as large as Desert Storm (2014, 154). However, penalties in aircraft range and bomb loads are still steep because of a carrier's shorter runway, so U.S. forces should rely on the much more potent land-based air power when possible during a war. In most cases, friendly countries in harm's way of a potential regional hegemon would be likely to have an incentive to provide such bases. But in certain scenarios, especially in East Asia, with vast expanses of ocean, many islands, and no regional military alliances, the United States might benefit from keeping a few carriers around.

In an earlier time, the Department of Defense's *Bottom-Up Review,* published in 1993, noted that ten carriers would be needed to fight two major wars nearly simultaneously (Eland 2001, 110). So to err on the side of caution, for option three, in addition to Posen's four active carriers I retain two reserve carriers—one for good measure in a war and one allocated to being in overhaul.

This option would retain sixty destroyers for defense of the United States, of sea lines of communication, of the aircraft carriers as escorts, and as land-attack and missile-defense platforms.

The navy says that it needs thirty-five attack submarines during wartime (O'Rourke 2010, 6–8.3), but the Defense Department's post–Cold War *Bottom-Up Review* claimed that forty-five submarines would be needed to fight two regional wars nearly simultaneously (Eland 2001, 110). The relative submarine threats to the United States from major nations haven't changed that much since then. In fact, U.S. systems

have increased in potency, thus perhaps even increasing the U.S. lead during that time, with the results of the huge U.S. defense spending advantage over its nearest rivals being cumulative. In the past, the navy has altered such required submarine totals with little analytical justification. Thus, this option retains twenty-five submarines for one balancer-of-last-resort war scenario. (Twenty-five submarines are also retained in options one and two for defensive war scenarios closer to the U.S. coast.)

Option three would retain an even more robust nuclear deterrent than options one or two. Nine of fourteen Trident nuclear ballistic submarines would be retained: four in the Atlantic, four in the Pacific, and one allocated to overhaul. With each of the eight deployed subs having 24 missiles and 5 warheads on each missile, this force would produce 960 deployed strategic nuclear warheads—still much less than the 1,550 allowed under the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with Russia, which took effect in 2011. The 960 warheads are about double the traditional 500 assumed to be needed to completely obliterate a major power, such as Russia or China.

Conclusion

With over $19 trillion in foreign debt and expensive major wars in Afghanistan and Iraq costing as much as $6 trillion, the United States desperately needs to retrench from its vast and overextended informal overseas empire of permanent and entangling alliances, hundreds of overseas military bases, and profligate foreign armed interventions in order to renew its economy and republican form of government. In the long run, a healthy economy is the root of other forms of national power—military, cultural, social, and political. In addition, the lives of American servicemen and women are regularly squandered in wars in nonstrategic countries because the current vague U.S. grand strategy of primacy refuses to prioritize U.S. interests, and so the United States thus tries to police the entire world, protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.

As one measure of current imperial overstretch, the United States currently accounts for more than one-third of the world's military expenditures but for only about 16 percent of the world's GDP. Defense expenditures are not the only or even the biggest excessive spending problem the United States has (entitlements are bigger), but the U.S. grand strategy of world primacy is still exorbitantly expensive, is unnecessary for the security of the most intrinsically secure great power in world history, and is actually counterproductive because it needlessly engenders ill will overseas and thus retaliatory blowback terrorism.

This essay has postulated three options for reconfiguring the U.S. military to a less costly and more defensive posture to accompany a change in orientation to a more modest grand strategy of "independent internationalism." The most modest of the three minimalist options proposes a military that would comply with the text of the Constitution and defend only American citizens, U.S. territory, and the American way of life from foreign attack. The second option would also defend U.S. overseas trade, but it would also provide more rapid-reaction capability against state sponsors

of terrorism and go beyond a minimum nuclear deterrent to retain the capability to knock out the entire target set of a major power. The third and most ambitious option would act as a balancer of last resort to help defend friendly countries against a potential hegemonic power's takeover of the important regions of the Eurasian landmass. Any of these options would be better than the outrageously expensive military posture required to sustain the unsustainable—a grand strategy of worldwide primacy.

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