The position of the United States in the post–Cold War era has been one of fundamental security. When the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended, the United States entered an era in which it faced no serious security threats from any other state in the international system. In the words of syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer, this was America’s “unipolar moment.” In addition to losing its main adversary, the United States merely enhanced what had long been true: it was remarkably insulated from foreign threats thanks to its geographic isolation, weak neighbors, unparalleled economic and military power, and its nuclear deterrent. To add to this extremely favorable position, the world has been on a long trajectory of greater safety, more stability, less violence, and fewer wars, enhancing even further America’s unprecedented invulnerability.

Yet, despite this era of peerlessness and peace, the United States has maintained, and in some ways expanded, its grand strategy of primacy. Primacy holds that a peaceful world order and our own national security depend on maintaining a preponderance of U.S. power—a “benevolent hegemony”—over the international system. This approach calls for a large military, a globe-straddling forward-deployed military presence, extensive security commitments to allies, and the frequent threat and use of force in pursuit of a wide range of national interests, not merely to ensure America’s physical security. Indeed, the United States guarantees the defense of almost 60 nations in Europe, Asia, and the Americas.
in formal treaty arrangements, along with many more tacit agreements with non-treaty allies in the Middle East and Asia. It also maintains forward bases all over the world, with over 250,000 troops stationed at 800 military bases and installations in some 70 countries.4

The costs of this expansive grand strategy are enormous. The United States has been at war for two out of every three years since the end of the Cold War, despite being a peerless power in an era of historically low levels of interstate violence.5 In fact, since 1989, the United States has engaged in more military interventions than it had in the preceding 190 years.6 America has spent almost $15 trillion on its military in this period,7 extracting resources from more productive sectors of the private economy and diverting taxpayer money away from useful domestic investments.8 It has also contributed to America’s growing debt problem: in 2012, the U.S. debt surpassed its total GDP for the first time since World War II.9 The strategic costs are also tremendous. By elevating peripheral interests to the level of vital ones, and assuming responsibility for the defense of a multitude of allies, primacy increases the risks of entanglement and entrapment. Primacy also tends to undermine liberal values at home by eroding constitutional checks and balances on war powers, incentivizing government secrecy, and infringing on civil liberties in the name of security.10 Yet, these costs and sacrifices are not necessary. Indeed, securing U.S. defense and stabilizing the international system have been accomplished in spite of U.S. primacy, not because of it.11

Why does America engage in such an expensive, expansive, and risky foreign policy despite its safety? Some scholarship emphasizes structural realist explanations for this puzzle, arguing that the unipole pursues an activist foreign policy because it lacks external constraints on its power.12 Strictly structural accounts, however, sometimes fail to account for state behavior in a way that is consistent with the historical record. It is a challenge, in the first place, to achieve consensus about what structure prevails at any given point in history.13 Even when there is general agreement, structure can yield divergent outcomes: a multipolar structure resulted in very different foreign policies by the European great powers in 1815 than it did in 1914, for example. Security-oriented explanations argue that U.S. activism has contributed to global peace and stability and is therefore pursued on its own merits,14 though this argument underestimates the costs of primacy while discounting well-founded alternative theories for the lack of great power conflict in the postwar era.15 Other analysis points to the role that private and bureaucratic domestic interests play in driving foreign

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Since 1989, the U.S. has engaged in more military interventions than the preceding 190 years.

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policy activism. Bureaucratic and special interest explanations, however, fail to sufficiently account for the deeply ideological roots of primacy.

This article explores the role that status and prestige concerns play in incentivizing costly and unwise foreign policy activism. It argues further that such concerns are a poor basis for sound foreign policymaking.

**Defining Status and Prestige**

Status and prestige motivations are pervasive in international politics. The renowned twentieth century scholar of international relations Hans Morgenthau wrote early on of “the policy of prestige.” Princeton University’s Robert Gilpin defined it as “the reputation for power.” According to professors Allan Dafoe, John Renshon, and Paul Huth, there is a consensus among scholars that “leaders, policy elites, and national populations are often concerned, even obsessed, with their status.”

Status refers to collective beliefs about a state’s standing or rank in the international system. It is, according to Dartmouth College’s William C. Wohlforth, a “recognized position in a social hierarchy, implying relations of dominance and deference.” It has a profound influence on the beliefs held by elites and citizens about their nation’s identity and purpose. Ohio State University scholar of international relations Randall L. Schweller and University of Nevada’s Xiaoyu Pu, citing Gilpin, refer to prestige as “the reputation for power that serves as the everyday currency of international politics.”

Daniel Markey of Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies defines the “prestige motive” as “the individual or collective desire for public recognition of eminence as an end in itself” and argues that it “consistently stands at the heart of international competition and conflict.”

In a 2010 study, Richard Ned Lebow, professor of International Political Theory in the Department of War Studies, King’s College London, found that out of 94 interstate wars fought between 1648 and 2008, 58 percent were fought for status and prestige, and another 10 percent for revenge, while 25 percent were motivated purely for security or economic interests.

The concepts of status and prestige are related to, though distinct from, credibility and reputation. The latter terms are frequently used in reference to the believability of a state’s threats and promises regarding specific security commitments. Deterrence, for example, is enhanced when a state’s willingness to use...
force in response to specific unwanted action by an adversary is credible. A state may have a reputation for following through on threats and promises—that is, it may have credibility given past behavior. In this sense, reputation is a signal of future behavior. By contrast, status and prestige are cumulative and not specifically tied to bolstering deterrence or eliciting action (or inaction) on a particular issue.

This brings us to another important definitional issue: do status and prestige have instrumental utility that serves rational strategic interests, or are they mostly sought as noninstrumental ends in themselves? Scholars disagree. Morgenthau contended that “prestige … [is] rarely an end in itself.” Some argue that high status states benefit from a kind of soft power that leads weaker states to accommodate the interests of the high status state, complementing material capabilities and reducing the costs associated with being a major power.22

However, even those who assign rational utility to status and prestige concede it can adversely influence foreign policy in a way that departs from objective assessments of core security and economic interests. As University of Arizona political scientist Thomas Volgy et al explain, “The acquisition of major power status provides states with added influence but also creates additional pressures to pursue policies and interests outside their immediate neighborhoods.”23 This can encourage states to pursue costly policies for the sake of peripheral, or even imaginary, interests. States trying to avoid perceived losses in status are often driven to pursue risk-averse strategies and even to become mired in failing ventures.24

Markey argues bluntly that the pursuit of status and prestige “is irrational in a material sense because [it] does not always yield optimal material outcomes” and “because it does not always accord with an obvious means-ends calculus.”25 Jonathan Mercer, scholar of international relations at the University of Washington, calls prestige an illusion and argues that it has “neither strategic nor intrinsic value.”26 Status and prestige, he argues, aside from being close to impossible to test or measure empirically, are typically reflections of what policymakers and domestic audiences think of their own country. Foreign audiences tend to discount the alleged status and prestige that a particular state ascribes to itself, and so do not offer voluntary deference and accommodation.27

**Status and Prestige in Action**

States pursue status and prestige in a multitude of ways, from building up a nuclear weapons stockpile to competing in the space race. States jealously guard their membership in exclusive international clubs—like the UN Security Council, the G7, or NATO—not just because of the influence or protection that inclusion may deliver, but because club membership is a major symbol of status in the hierarchy of nations.28 Such membership confers major powers with in-group
recognition and a seat at the table for international issues that may not even have a
great bearing on a member’s core national interests, thereby affirming that state’s
status as a great power with global responsibilities and influence.

In the same vein, club exclusion can represent a major hit to the status of other-
wise major powers, as it does with India, which has long sought a permanent seat
on the UN Security Council, or like when the G8 suspended Russian membership
as punishment for Moscow’s annexation of Crimea. In the quest for prestige, states
engage in ostentatious displays of conspicuous waste by purchasing expensive
weapons systems that do not tangibly improve security. Analogous to an individ-
ual’s purchase of a high-end watch, a luxury car, or a designer pocketbook, a state’s
procurement of, for example, “an expensive, aging French aircraft carrier” of little
or no strategic value, like the one Brazil purchased in 2000, “establishes that coun-
try’s place in an international social hierarchy,” writes Lilach Gilady, associate pro-
fessor at the University of Toronto.29

Examples from European History
According to George Washington University’s Martha Finnemore, “notions about
honor, glory, and status” had long been prime drivers of military intervention in
European history.30 Acquisition of expensive far-flung colonies by the European
imperial powers, for example, was driven primarily by status and prestige
motivations. Colonies did little to enhance great powers’ physical security, and
by the mid-nineteenth century, frequently cost more than they yielded in imperial
rents.31 Britain’s empire was a profound source of national pride and prestige. Following the apex of
the British Empire in the closing decades of the nine-
teenth century, however, the costs of maintaining it
became onerous. London nevertheless held fast to
its global possessions, even through the privations
and hardships of two world wars that devastated Brit-
ain’s capabilities. Even after World War II, when it
was clear the United States had taken the reins of
great power leadership, Britain’s aspirations continued
to exceed its resources, and it took decades before
Britain relinquished its holdings east of the Suez
Canal.32

In the nineteenth century, Germany, then a rising state eager to obtain esteem
among the great powers, pined “to be at least equal if not superior to Great Britain,
an aspiration that led to the naval race and search for overseas colonies,” explain
scholars Deborah Welch Larson, T.V. Paul, and William C. Wohlforth.33 The
German historian Heinrich von Treitschke wrote in 1899 that “our existence as

After World War II, Washington gradually adopted an expansive catalog of
global responsibilities.
a state of the first rank is vitally affected by the question whether we can become a power beyond the seas.” According to Yale historian Donald Kagan, Germany’s desire for colonies was “based far less on a concern for ‘interest,’ … than in the search for ‘honor.’”

During the Second Moroccan Crisis of 1911, German diplomat Friedrich von Holstein insisted that Germany must escalate “not for material reasons alone, but even more for the sake of prestige.” At the same time, British Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George wrote that “Britain should at all hazards maintain her place and prestige among the Great Powers of the world” and that if the price of peace meant surrendering that position, “then I say emphatically that peace at that price would be a humiliation intolerable for a great country like ours to endure.” German and British action around the turn of the twentieth century was driven in large part by the aspiration for prestige, and often led to more assertive foreign policy decisions.

German naval expansion in the lead up to World War I was similarly motivated by a desire to achieve Germany’s “place in the sun,” or recognition as a high-status great power, but was extremely costly economically, and ultimately proved devastating for its security. Germany focused its resentment on Great Britain, its most valuable trading partner and a country that posed little plausible threat to its security. Indeed, Kaiser Wilhelm described the competition with Great Britain not as one in which the physical security or economic interests of Germany had to be defended, but as “merely a question of who was to be the ‘top dog.’”

**Emerging U.S. Activism**

The United States, too, sought great power status through naval expansion and the acquisition of overseas colonies. Theodore Roosevelt’s naval buildup and subsequent policy of sailing the Great White Fleet around the world in 1907-1909 flamboyantly signaled to the world America’s great power status. Prestige and honor were important motives of the United States’ subsequent involvement in the 1898 Spanish-American War. Victory over Spain prompted recognition of America’s international status and quickly earned the United States several colonial assets in Latin America and Asia. This subsequently led to an expanded definition of the national interest and of the United States’ role in world affairs. President William McKinley wrote at the time that the war “imposed upon us obligations from which we cannot escape and from which it is dishonorable to seek escape.” In the closing years of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, America’s “main impetus for a wider and more assertive involvement in external affairs,” according to the historian John A. Thompson, “came from consciousness
of America’s new power and the belief that its enhanced international status entitled it to greater prerogatives and brought wider responsibilities.”

The end of World War II marked the inauguration of America’s hegemonic role. Emerging from the conflict as the most powerful state in the international system, Washington would gradually adopt an expansive catalog of global responsibilities, most of which it retains to this day. According to American diplomat James B. Foley, “public support for U.S. global leadership [since WWII] has been sustained by a romantic faith in America’s overseas mission – a kind of internationalized Manifest Destiny” that makes any suggestion of retrenchment “psychologically deflating.”

Robert Jervis, professor of International Affairs at Columbia University, writes, “Once a state has enjoyed the perquisites of a great power, it will find it difficult to adjust to a smaller and less privileged role … retrenchment is felt to be an abdication of responsibility.”

When decision makers pursue prestige policies, they tend to veil them in the language of material security interests and norm-oriented objectives. The U.S. involvement in Vietnam is a concrete example of how prestige concerns can be misleadingly framed in security terms. The public message for the necessity of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam strongly emphasized security justifications like preventing falling dominos of communist states that could then threaten the free world, and normative justifications like ensuring a better, freer way of life for the South Vietnamese. But by 1964, Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton and Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy acknowledged privately that America’s “international prestige” was what was most “directly at risk” in South Vietnam. A 1965 internal Defense Department memo described U.S. aims in Vietnam as “70% to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat”—or in other words, to avoid a loss of prestige.

Similarly, America’s experience in the Korean War arguably owes much to status and prestige concerns. The United States established what was supposed to be a temporary military presence there following the Japanese surrender in August 1945. By December of that year, General John Hodge recommended full withdrawal. Secretary of War Robert Patterson argued the same in April 1947. In 1948, the National Security Council proposed withdrawing all U.S. troops by the end of the year. The Joint Chiefs explained, “Korea is of little strategic value to the United States.” But when North Korea invaded the South in 1950, U.S. involvement gained symbolic value that, in the minds of the Truman administration, outweighed the negligible strategic interests at stake. Paul Kirk, the U.S. Ambassador in Moscow, cabled Secretary of State Dean Acheson to say that the North Korean invasion represented “a clear-cut Soviet challenge … [that] constitutes a direct threat to our leadership of the free world.” Thus, U.S. military involvement in the war was ultimately about averting perceived losses to America’s reputation and international standing.
The Cold War itself might be understood in terms of a competition for international standing, rather than any real military threat the United States or the Soviet Union posed to one another, especially in its latter half. The Cold War ended not because the United States succeeded militarily, but because Mikhail Gorbachev and his advisers decided to forfeit the costly Cold War contest for the sake of domestic priorities.

U.S. Foreign Policy Activism in this Generation

Status and prestige have been the most prevalent drivers of U.S. foreign policy for decades, with frequent references to the idea of America as the world’s sole superpower, the leading state, and the indispensable nation. As Wohlforth explains, America’s drive to maintain U.S. predominance even in the face of steep costs and a lack of serious security threats has much to do with the fact that “U.S. decision makers derive independent utility from their state’s status as a unipole.”

Yet, the expansive grand strategy pursued by the United States, especially since the end of the Cold War, is unnecessary to secure America’s core economic and security interests, and frequently undermines them. Obsession with America’s place in the international hierarchy and with maintaining America’s prestigious image means the United States is more likely to pursue interventionist policies for the sake of nonmaterial gains, often to the detriment of its own wealth and security. The Cold War intensified America’s preoccupation with status and Washington framed its victory in profoundly triumphalist, prestige-satisfying terms. President George H. W. Bush talked about a “New World Order” led by an unchallenged United States, and used rhetoric that flattered Americans’ perception of their nation as exceptional.

Internal Defense Department documents, too, called for maintaining the new U.S. position by “discourag[ing] [other nations] from challenging our leadership” and “deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role.” Larger regional roles for distant nations in the immediate post–Cold War environment would not likely have threatened U.S. security, and in fact could enhance it to the extent that these states could carry the burden for resolving local disputes or balancing against rising powers. However, nations aspiring to larger regional roles would undermine America’s standing and eminence as an unrivaled victor.

Being the sole superpower intensified the emphasis on status. In his second inaugural speech, President Bill Clinton proclaimed, “America stands alone as
the world’s indispensable nation.” Secretary of State Madeline Albright, in perhaps the most famous iteration of this idea, justified America’s bombing of Iraq in 1998 in the following terms: “If we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and see further than other countries into the future.” In her memoirs, Albright explained her “purpose was not to put down others, but rather to stir a sense of pride and responsibility among Americans, so that we would be less reluctant to take on problems.” In other words, appealing to Americans’ belief in their country as one of exceptionally high status, unmatched by any other state, bolstered support for foreign policy activism and intervention. A grand strategy of primacy—in which America acts as the world’s policeman, guarantor of global security, intervener of first resort, and adjudicator of far-off disputes—was justified by appeals to its status as Number One.

The assertive interventionism of the United States in the post–Cold War era largely involved responding to low-threat challenges by weak, lower-ranked actors—including Serbia’s Slobodan Milosevic, Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, North Korea’s Kim dynasty, al-Qaeda and the Taliban. None of these largely symbolic challenges, save al Qaeda’s attacks, threatened the physical security of the United States. Nuclear proliferation by rogue regimes might have undermined strategic stability in distant regions, but the likelihood that any state would welcome its own destruction by using nuclear weapons for anything other than deterrence was always vanishingly small. Certainly none of these adversaries threatened America’s relative power position in the international system. But if left unaddressed, they would have humiliated the sole superpower and raised doubts about U.S. leadership.

A major reason for the Clinton administration’s intervention in Bosnia, though public statements emphasized humanitarian and security-oriented objectives, was encapsulated in a stinging critique from then-French President Jacques Chirac that America’s refusal to take military action in the former Yugoslavia would have meant that “the position of the leader of the free world is now vacant.” Clinton later reportedly complained to his National Security Advisor Anthony Lake that conflict in Bosnia was “killing the U.S. position of strength” and “doing enormous damage to the United States and our standing in the world.” According to the late international relations theorist Kenneth Waltz, the United States “acted [in the Balkans] not for the sake of its own security but to maintain its leadership position in Europe.”

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 led many observers to conclude that the post–Cold War era of low security threats was over. But this false impression by no means diminished the role of status and prestige. The subsequent invasion of Iraq, although justified in security and norm-oriented imperatives, arguably had more to do with an expression of rage and recovery of America’s
prestige than any legitimate threats to U.S. or global security. Myriad ideas drove the case for war, but attacking Iraq, Lebow argues, was “intended to showcase U.S. military might and political will and send a message of power and resolve . . . to act decisively” and “by so doing lock in the United States as the world’s sole hegemon.”

In a post–9/11 context, Saddam’s perceived defiance of America became especially intolerable. Failure to prosecute the war, in the words of two of its most prominent advocates, Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol, would represent an “abdication of global leadership” and the unacceptable permission of “successful challenges to American power.” German strategist Josef Joffe wrote in 2006 that the war was about “the certification of U.S. supremacy.”

Two other Iraq war supporters, Gary Schmitt and Thomas Donnelly, justified the invasion as necessary to “restore American preeminence” in the Middle East and “restore national honor” in the aftermath of 9/11. Henry Kissinger reportedly described his support for the Iraq War in similar terms. We needed to invade Iraq, not because Saddam posed a threat, but “because Afghanistan was not enough”; the forces of radical Islam want to humiliate us, he said, “and we need to humiliate them.”

Fixation with America’s status continued in the Obama years, as the administration maintained America’s expansive grand strategy of primacy and continued to use U.S. power assertively. In his 2010 State of the Union Address, President Obama lamented Chinese, German, and Indian efforts to improve their national standing. “These nations aren’t playing for second place,” he warned, and “I do not accept second place for the United States of America.” In his 2016 address, he boasted about America being “the most powerful nation on Earth,” adding that, “our standing around the world is higher than when I was elected to this office, and when it comes to every important international issue, people of the world do not look to Beijing or Moscow to lead. They call us.”

This equation of America’s military dominance and high rank with the obligation to intervene to solve myriad international issues is illustrative of how status drives activism.

**Trump may be more prone to status and prestige motivations than his predecessors.**

**Status and Prestige in the Trump Era**

During the 2016 campaign, then-candidate Donald Trump occasionally articulated a reduced global role for the United States with slogans about eschewing regime change wars and revoking American security commitments to long-standing allies in Europe and Asia. To the extent that this helped him electorally, these talking points
tapped into a generalized fatigue among voters about the burdens of global leadership. But candidate Trump contradicted these ideas as often as he espoused them. And though he withdrew from the Paris climate agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, as president, Trump has proved unwilling to reduce America’s activist military role in the world, and indeed may be more prone to status and prestige motivations than his predecessors. Indeed, Trump’s unique, if mutable, version of “America First” nationalism extols martial valor, calls for aggressively confronting international defiance and besmirched honor, and as he declared in a July 2017 address in Warsaw, tasks American foreign policy with nothing less than the “defense of civilization itself.”

Many of Trump’s foreign policy decisions are driven by prestige motivations, as exemplified by current U.S. policy in Syria, Afghanistan, Iran and North Korea. In April 2017, President Trump launched punitive missile strikes against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad following alleged chemical weapons attacks. In announcing his decision, Trump said “It is in this [sic] vital national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons,” though no explanation was offered for how a single strike against a single Syrian airbase would deter the use or prevent the spread of chemical weapons. Indeed, as many predicted, it had no such effect, as the Assad regime has subsequently been accused of similar chemical weapons attacks. This was a purely symbolic gesture that accomplished no tactical or humanitarian objective whatsoever, though it was intended to reinforce America’s status as the indispensable nation, policeman of the world, and punisher of rogue states. Elliot Abrams, a veteran of the Reagan and Bush administrations, described the action as evidence that Trump had “finally accepted the role of Leader of the Free World.” Anne Marie Slaughter, president and CEO of New America and former director of Policy Planning for the Department of State, argued that the Obama administration’s failure to do what Trump did had “undermined the U.S., it undermined the world order.” “The strikes vindicated America’s prestige,” wrote Walter Russell Mead, Distinguished Fellow at the Hudson Institute and professor at Bard College, “and dealt a clear setback to those who seek to humiliate or marginalize the U.S.”

The strike also served Trump’s need for prestige in the domestic sphere. As Xiaoyu Pu and Randall L. Schweller explain, “International status signaling often arises from a domestic political struggle for legitimacy,” something the outsider Trump needed desperately and received in spades in the aftermath of the attack. Prominent voices in politics and media that had been harshly critical of Trump in the first months of his presidency heaped enormous praise on him for his decision to use force. CNN’s Fareed Zakaria declared, “I think Donald Trump became president of the United States” the moment he bombed Syria.
Democratic leaders Sen. Chuck Schumer and Rep. Nancy Pelosi publicly endorsed the strike, while Trump’s Republican antagonists, including Sen. John McCain, said the strike was an “encouraging” sign of change in Trump’s approach to the world. Ian Bremmer, a well-known political scientist and DC insider, assessed that, “Among the U.S. political establishment,” Trump’s Syria strike was “the most popular action Trump has taken to date as President.”

In Afghanistan, the Trump administration is pursuing a minor surge, deploying up to 4,000 additional troops at an added cost of about $1 billion per year, albeit without a new strategy that might overcome the longstanding stalemate and failing counter-insurgency campaign. Laurel Miller, who was special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the Department of State until June 2017, told Politico a month after her departure, “I don’t think there is any serious analyst of the situation in Afghanistan who believes that the war is winnable.” UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres concluded the same following a visit to Afghanistan in June 2017. The security rationale for continuing the war is that a military withdrawal would allow Afghanistan to become a haven for terrorists determined to strike the United States, but scholars have long criticized this as the “safe haven myth.”

The most apparent motivation for the policy is not to measurably mitigate the terrorist threat, but rather, as in Vietnam, to avoid the humiliation of defeat and the associated injury to America’s status and prestige.

Trump’s approach to Iran and North Korea is similarly divorced from any rational strategic calculus. His early proposal for a $54 billion increase in defense spending is another illustrative example. This dollar amount did not reflect specific strategic requirements. Instead, boosting military spending, as a New York Times report put it, reflects Trump’s “fascination with raw military might, which he sees as synonymous with America’s standing in the world.” Trump, the report continued, “has shown a flair for symbols and showmanship. By building the world’s most expensive weapons systems, he repurposes them as symbols of power.”

Trump’s approach to Iran and North Korea, perhaps the two most precarious national security issues on his agenda, is similarly divorced from a rational strategic calculus or any realistic appraisal of threats and interests. Trump’s refusal in October 2017 to certify Iranian compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) happened despite successive verification reports of Iranian compliance from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and despite support for the deal from the permanent members of the UN Security Council, the European Union, many of Trump’s top cabinet officials, as well as America’s
military and intelligence community. The president instead insists on escalating U.S.-Iranian tensions and denigrating a successful non-proliferation agreement, not because Iran poses a serious threat to U.S. security or interests, but for reasons having more to do with Iran’s traditional role as the villain in U.S. foreign policy and with maintaining an image of an America that does not give in to enemies.

Likewise with North Korea. Scholarly and official assessments almost universally assess Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development as defensive in nature. The Kim regime seeks these capabilities to deter a preventive attack or regime change war by the United States. Depictions of Pyongyang as a suicidal regime ready and willing to provoke nuclear retaliation is largely fantasy. And claims that a nuclear North Korea will have more coercive leverage or be more likely to start or escalate conventional wars is not supported by scholarship.

Trump’s approach of “maximum pressure” essentially amounts to ever harsher economic sanctions, threats of war, and preconditions to diplomatic negotiations that would amount to unilateral capitulation by North Korea, without reassurances of reciprocal goodwill from Washington. According to Deepak Malhotra, associate professor at Harvard Business School, setting preconditions that the other side clearly cannot meet is a form of “political gamesmanship,” defined as “the art of winning games by using various ploys and tactics to gain a psychological advantage.”

The scholarship on economic sanctions suggests this approach is unlikely to be effective in improving North Korean behavior. Indeed, the public judgement of the Central Intelligence Agency “is that no amount of economic sanctions will force the North to give up its nuclear program.” Furthermore, the military option is widely considered to be too costly to seriously contemplate. Pragmatic measures to resolve the impasse are available, but President Trump continues to deliberately intensify bilateral enmity, seemingly out of frustration with North Korean effrontery and a disinclination to sully U.S. prestige with appeasement or compromise. Pyongyang’s nuclear program and refusal to obey Trump’s commands represent successful defiance of America’s will and a threat to our standing, if not our security.

Status-Driven Foreign Policy is Damaging to U.S. Interests

In the aftermath of the humiliating failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, President Kennedy’s advisers “recommended a greater military commitment as the only way to save American prestige.” Kennedy wisely dismissed this option, asking his advisers, “What is prestige? Is it the shadow of power or the substance of power? We are going to work on the substance of power. No doubt we will be
kicked in the can for the next couple of weeks, but that won’t affect the main business.”

Too much of post–Cold War U.S. foreign policy has been driven by status and prestige concerns, or as Kennedy put it, the shadow, not the substance, of power. The foreign policy of the United States should be driven primarily by an objective assessment of its strategic position and the threats it faces to its physical security and economic well-being. Focusing on tangible material interests tends to weaken the motivation for rash interventionism in pursuit of unimportant, or unattainable, goals. By contrast, a prestige-driven foreign policy encourages gratuitous expansionism and costly military policies that waste resources and inflate the significance of unimportant issues.

A grand strategy driven by status and prestige motivations is harmful for U.S. interests in several ways. First, it is an irrational basis for foreign policy that subordinates tangible security and economic interests to intangible image maintenance. Second, while a status-driven foreign policy can be an effective way to flatter Americans’ inflated self-image, it sometimes has the opposite result abroad and, ironically, often undermines America’s esteem among foreign audiences. Finally, status and prestige motivations encourage activism at a time when U.S. foreign policy should be more restrained. A few case studies will help illustrate these stated defects of a foreign policy strategy oriented around prestige.

Prestige-driven foreign policy is actually counterproductive for international respect and deference.

A status- or prestige-driven foreign policy is not only irrational in the sense of not maximizing utility, but also in that it is counterproductive to the desired goal of increased international respect and deference. For example, in a 1965 memorandum to the secretaries of state and defense, George Ball, Under Secretary of State from 1961-1966, argued that those insisting on continued involvement in Vietnam were erroneously linking tactical withdrawal with a loss of prestige.101 Ironically, the U.S. quagmire in Vietnam is precisely what tarnished American status and prestige in that era, both among domestic and foreign audiences.

The same irony characterized the Bush administration’s 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq. The invasion was at least in part meant to boost U.S. honor and prestige and reestablish America’s hegemonic status after the humiliation of the 9/11 attacks. But it actually damaged America’s standing in the international system, eliciting counter-balancing from rivals like Russia and China, and defiance from close allies such as France, who conspicuously opposed the war, and Turkey, a...
NATO ally who denied U.S. forces access to its bases and airspace. Public opinion of the United States in foreign countries sunk because of the war.\textsuperscript{102} A status-driven foreign policy, therefore, probably delivered diminished, not enhanced, U.S. status.

Finally, status and prestige motivations have and continue to encourage the United States to maintain the expansive and costly grand strategy of primacy when its unprecedented physical security allows for retrenchment and a far more restrained foreign policy. One particularly troubling area in this context is the U.S. posture in East Asia, where American military power is significant, but where China’s relative power is on the rise. The response in Washington to China has largely focused on boosting U.S. military assets in the region, reaffirming U.S. security commitments to China’s neighboring rivals, and challenging Chinese claims to a series of uninhabited rocks and shoals in the South China Sea that carry no strategic significance for the United States. Beijing’s military buildup in recent years, especially its naval expansion and aircraft carrier project, has generated anxiety in Washington about American decline, but it does not pose a direct threat to the United States.\textsuperscript{103}

The United States appears to insist on continued domination of the East Asia region, not because China poses a threat to the physical security of the United States, or even its regional allies, but rather because the rise of China poses a threat to America’s status as the unipolar hegemon. This seems to bear the markings of a status dilemma, where, as Schweller and Pu explain, “competitive arming threatens the other’s status, not security.”\textsuperscript{104} Wise strategy would counsel the United States to accommodate China’s rise, allow China’s neighbors to carry the burden of containing it, and unless and until China poses a substantive security threat, focus on enjoying strategic immunity in its own hemisphere.\textsuperscript{105}

Retrenchment would produce tangible security and economic benefits.\textsuperscript{106} America’s preoccupation with its status as the peerless indispensable nation encourages costly risk-acceptant activism while discouraging prudent restraint. Brushing aside this obsession with standing and self-image, and prioritizing objective material interests in foreign policy decision making, would save much unnecessarily expended blood and treasure.

The Illusion of American Decline

Some observers link the prospect of retrenchment with the decline of America. Others insist hegemony is inherently cyclical and, given the decrease in relative U.S. economic and geopolitical dominance, decline is inevitable.\textsuperscript{107} Fears of U.S. decline, however, reflect a preoccupation more with the shadow of power than the substance of it.\textsuperscript{108} Though not without its problems, the U.S.
economy continues to grow and Americans continue to enjoy a per capita income well above the global average. Roughly nine-in-ten Americans enjoy a standard of living higher than the global middle-income standard. A decline in superpower status will not change that. When it comes to security, Americans are likewise in an enviable position. Contrary to depictions in our politics and news media, the United States remains extraordinarily insulated from external threats, something unlikely to change with a more restrained grand strategy.

Commentators worried about decline tend to associate it with a loss of status and some sense of failure, forfeit, and defeat. Beyond psychological loss aversion, however, it is hard to see how a reduction in America’s global military role equates to any real degradation in the wealth or security of American citizens. Over the course of the twentieth century, circumstances forced Britain to relinquish its top position in world politics and shed its global empire. This inflicted a painful sense of decline in Britain, but according to historian George L. Bernstein, “it is not clear that the loss of empire represented any decline in real power at all; the decline was primarily a perception by Britons and others who had identified Britain’s greatness with its empire.” In withdrawing, “Britain may well have lost an encumbrance rather than power.”

Primacists assume too much American authorship of today’s peaceful and wealth-generating international order, and then warn hyperbolically of catastrophic system collapse if the United States retrenches. In truth, today’s global stability trends and economic growth rates are more robust than that. And there is little reason to believe that staying out of the great power contest would undercut the wealth and security of U.S. citizens. Robert Jervis illustrates this point by reference to other former great powers, “Sweden is no longer a great power, but in what sense is this a failure? Swedish citizens, if not the abstraction of the Swedish state, probably are better off for this. They are rich and have been spared several wars. Similarly, postwar Japan was shorn of its empire and armed forces and is no longer a complete great power. But it is hard to say that the country and its citizens are the poorer for this loss of role and status.” He continued, “Sitting on the sidelines, although only possible under special circumstances of geography and the interests of other important states, can be a fine place to watch (and benefit) as the great power parade goes by.”

Robert Kagan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, warns against committing “preemptive superpower suicide out of a misplaced fear of ... declining [U.S.] power.” The real danger is closer to the opposite. Indeed, to the
extent that America’s wealth and security is at risk of degradation and decline, it is likely to be exacerbated by a stubborn insistence on maintaining a costly permanent global military presence, a hyper-interventionist foreign policy, and excessively high defense budgets.115

While America’s extraordinary wealth and resilience means it can probably sustain an expansive, status-driven, and activist foreign policy for the foreseeable future,116 the risks of over-extension and of succumbing to what Princeton University’s G. John Ikenberry calls the “imperial temptation,” are very real.117 This temptation involves not only succumbing to ruinous adventures like Vietnam and Iraq, but also includes gradually sacrificing liberal democratic values at home as the security state undermines civil liberties protections, weakens constitutional checks on executive war powers, and incentivizes excessive government secrecy. The United States can choose to husband its still unmatched power and forswear status and prestige-driven foreign policy excesses, or it can hasten its own decline by extending its hyper-interventionist posture deep into the future. Neither path is imposed on us by circumstances; it remains a choice.

Notes


7. From FY1990 to what is expected for FY2017, the U.S. government has incurred $14.3673 trillion worth of outlays for the national defense. This estimate is in constant FY2009 dollars. Source: Office of Management and Budget Historical Table 8.2—Outlays by Budget Enforcement Act Category in Constant (FY2009) Dollars: 1962–2022.


27. Ibid, 133–168.


34. Quoted in Lebow, Cultural Theory of International Relations, 335.


41. Markey writes, “The most important motive” of U.S. involvement in the Spanish-American War, “is to be found in the mass national desire for honor, prestige, or glory.” Markey, “Prestige Motive in International Relations,” 301.


51. Ibid, 169.


64. Lebow, Cultural Theory of International Relations, 440.


Lebow, A Cultural Theory of International Relations, 467–468.


Pu and Schweller in Status in World Politics, 152.


