

# America's 'Global Policeman' Role

America's influential neocons and their liberal-hawk sidekicks want U.S. interventions pretty much everywhere, but other powers are chafing against this U.S. "global policeman," as ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller explains.

By Graham E. Fuller

Global disorder is on the rise. What can the U.S. do about it? There are two fundamentally different approaches one can take – it all depends on your philosophy of how the world works.

The first school thinks primarily in terms of law, order and authority: it accepts the need for a global policeman. The second school is more willing to let regional nations take the initiative to eventually work things out among themselves. Both schools possess advantages and disadvantages. Something called Balance of Power politics lies halfway between the two.

Global policemen nominate themselves from among the ranks of the most powerful – and ambitious – states of the world. Over the last half century the U.S. has assumed this role – but a significant shift is already under way. In Washington this school argues that growing American disinclination to assert order is a key reason for a more chaotic world. From the end of World War II to the fall of the USSR in 1991 Washington had shared, reluctantly, that role with the Soviet Union – rivals but both unwilling to let the world spin out of control into chaos and nuclear war. Then, after the fall of the USSR, the U.S. triumphantly assumed the role of "the world's sole superpower." In an earlier century the British Empire played the same role, although contested by Germany, France and others.

In Washington right now, neoconservatives and liberal interventionists (export democracy, by gunpoint if necessary) lead the charge against what they see as U.S. abandonment of its moral duty, leaving the world in the lurch. Their list of American failed duties is long: if only we had moved earlier to remove the Kim dynasty in North Korea, or Assad in Syria, or blocked the referendum that reincorporated Crimea into Russia, or brought about regime change in Iran, or backed Saudi Arabia against Qatar to keep the Gulf from splitting, or employed sufficient force to put an end to civil conflict in Afghanistan, or backed Ukraine to the hilt against Russia, pressed more vigorously in Venezuela, established firmer lines in the China Sea, warned Philippine leader Duterte off from his murderous anti-drug policies, and intervened to prevent looming Ethiopian-Somali-Eritrean war in the strategic Horn of Africa, etc. The list of U.S. duties, neglected in the eyes of this school of "benign" intervention, is endless.

## Troubling Questions

Yet this perspective raises troubling questions:

–Is the U.S. willing to perpetually expend its blood and treasure around the world in military and covert interventions to remove undemocratic leaders – or simply leaders we don't like? Simply to maintain U.S. pre-eminence? What is the overall gain in a cost-benefit analysis?

–How acceptable are the opportunity costs of such interventions – as opposed to better use of U.S. taxpayer money domestically?

–How much can the U.S. really prevent the rise of other powers with their increasing sense of their own interests and entitlements? Small powers are willing to sacrifice quite a lot when it involves interests on their doorstep – compared to limited American enthusiasm for intervention across an ocean for dubious gain.

–How do we respond to rising weapons technology abroad which increasingly circumscribes U.S. freedom of action? Nuclear weapons employ technology from the mid-Twentieth Century. And by now many powers are developing a meaningful cyber capability against rivals and opponents. To a cyber-warrior the world is a candy store of targets. Ditto for drones – simple technology spreading fast, capable of inflicting potentially great damage.

The counter-perspective to the global policeman accepts the reality of new powers arising all around us. There is little we can do to prevent them. We increasingly face major alternative power centers out there. China, a non-player for the last hundred years or more (unlike in much earlier centuries), is formidably back on the scene and asserting political, economic and cultural power. China even assumes a new degree of global leadership functions, some of which contain positive features.

Europe, after over a century of murderous and suicidal wars, is finally back on its feet representing perhaps the most progressive political grouping in the world. With a lot of soft and hard power Europe feels increasingly independent.

Russia has a global vision stemming from centuries of exercising power widely across Eurasia, and in the Cold War, as a “global super-power.” Its diplomatic and military power far overshadows its poor economy, but it is willing to pay the cost to be part of the global game. As with China, Russia is not entirely a negative factor on the world scene either, except to those U.S. hawks reluctant to compromise with any alternative power.

Additionally the world is witnessing more and more medium powers asserting their

interests in their own regions than the U.S. or the Soviet Union would ever have “permitted” during the Cold War. Today that list includes states like India, Brazil, Japan, South Korea, Turkey, Iran, Canada, and South Korea with strong perceptions of their own interests.

### **Many Flashpoints**

Any world policeman today faces a growing number of flashpoints beyond its capabilities. Many are ugly and may cost lives of millions of people. Humanitarian crises will continue to abound (like Palestine, Yemen, South Sudan, the Congo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Myanmar, Afghanistan, global refugees.)

Global warming and environmental degradation create powerful refugee mills that produce millions of hungry and angry have-nots. U.S. intervention is not designed to cope with these issues.

And then routine intervention by a world policeman also creates another major negative: the continued political infantilization of so many countries in the world. Routine U.S. intervention invariably leads to warring parties who prefer in the end to deal with Washington rather than with their own rivals for power. We see this repeatedly, most recently in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Ukraine and elsewhere where factions prefer to manipulate Washington to get what they want rather than face local realities. The Gulf States today are similarly playing Washington against Iran rather than communicating.

So a difficult and deeper issue arises: should most countries and peoples be “allowed” to stew in their own juices? To settle their own issues? Should they not take local responsibility? Doesn’t political maturity arise from being compelled to deal with rivals within a country, or a region? Remember, everybody in the world is eager to enlist the U.S. to fight on its side. Didn’t it take two hideous World Wars (preceded by many uglier centuries before then) before war-like Europeans finally figured out that enough was enough, and created alternative mechanisms for dealing with each other? Yet now it is an article of faith in European politics that war in Europe must be *unthinkable*.

Do problems have to “ripen” (to use that ugly political science term) before warring factions decide it is simply too damaging, dangerous, costly – even immoral – to press the conflict forward?

In a thoughtful and skillfully-argued recent essay, long-time journalist and conservative geopolitical observer and thinker Robert Kaplan shows himself to be in the first camp: the indispensable need for imposed law and order.

He argues that only continuing American commitment to its deepest international ideals is what makes the U.S. what it is; that if we fail to uphold our ideals

we are left with no organizing national principle – and thus no national purpose. (Never mind that these “ideals” are upheld on a highly selective, transient, cherry-picked basis.)

### **Dubious Neocon Logic?**

But do we really believe that the U.S. will atrophy as a society in the absence of “maintaining global values?” It would be sad to think that U.S. greatness depends on constant intervention and war in the name of the global order.

How long can the U.S. go on “generously,” supplying international order? Perhaps we are indeed doomed to watch an increasingly Darwinian world out there, operating without Big Brother. But the handwriting is on the wall: few in the world still support American policing of the world – or perhaps policing by any single state.

If policing is required (and there may be an occasional role for it), it will ever more likely involve a consortium of major international players – at a bare minimum the European Union, China, and Russia. The United Nations Security Council, when it can agree, also plays an important role. Indeed, these three powers are determined to deny the U.S. any further monopoly of international power. And that was true before Trump.

In the end, how do we think about history? A process of gradual advancement? Or anarchy kept at bay only by great powers? Does history have any “meaning,” any trajectory? Or, as an earlier British statesman debunked the whole notion: “history is just one damn thing after another.”

If we believe that permanent conflict is simply a fundamental element of the human condition, then the argument for a policeman gains weight. But from now on international policing is going to be shared – like it or not. And however “inefficient” it may be.

After all, there aren’t many “benign” hegemon around any more to do the job – if they ever existed.

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