

10-1-2005

The High Cost of Primacy

Nathan P. Freier Mr.
CSIS/PKSOI

Follow this and additional works at: https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials

Recommended Citation

Freier, Nathan P. Mr., "The High Cost of Primacy" (2005). *Articles & Editorials*. 268.
https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials/268

This Op Ed is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles & Editorials by an authorized administrator of USAWC Press.

THE HIGH COST OF PRIMACY

Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Freier

It is critical that the elected representatives, policymakers, opinion leaders, and population of the United States recognize that the maintenance of our global position comes at a price. We must now acknowledge an historic certainty; a truism ignored in the decade that preceded the War on Terror and the pacification of Iraq. Dominant global power engenders persistent resistance and exposes the United States to enormous costs and burdens. This observation is value neutral. That some actively oppose us and we incur costs as a result should come as no surprise. We must realistically account for both in the formation of grand strategy.

Those competitors who sense either their position or existence threatened by American primacy will not roll over. Rather, they will push back with the range of instruments at their disposal. Though we will continue to enjoy the benefits of close international partnerships, competitor states will engage in nettlesome but manageable political, economic, and military balancing. Transnational and subnational opponents sensing an existential challenge and less constrained by the norms of international politics will increasingly resort to irregular and catastrophic assault on the United States and its interests. These challengers will employ clever combinations of incendiary rhetoric and violence in an attempt to erode American resolve and separate the United States from its partners. They seek to drive the cost of American primacy and close alliance with it to increasingly uncomfortable and ultimately unacceptable levels.

Mainstream American political elites broadly accept the necessity for the active maintenance of dominant U.S. influence. It is, in their eyes, a necessary component of a stable global order. There are differences on particular policy choices and rhetorical justifications. However, there is remarkable agreement on endgame: retention of global influence unmatched by all other strategically significant actors. Recent history has demonstrated that this pursuit will be neither risk free nor painless. Thus it is imperative that the nation prepare itself for a strategic future that includes periods of considerable conflict.

Increased sensitivity to the threat posed by purposeful resistance to U.S. influence has embarked the United States on a course populated by small wars and interventions of necessity. There is room to debate the requirement for any one intervention or small war in isolation. However, policy consensus on the retention of dominant influence and clear irregular and catastrophic challenges to it leave decisionmakers very little operating room strategically. Few viable alternatives exist, other than the active defense of our position and interests.

Securing American primacy relies on far more than the use of force, however. Indeed, over-reliance or dependency on military power in the end will be counterproductive. Successful defense of our global position demands holistic employment of all the nation's instruments of power in various combinations to reinforce progress and

success, as well as offset catastrophe before it can threaten us directly.

We continue to be threatened by extremism and criminality originating from ungoverned or irresponsibly-governed territory. Further, serious destabilization or political collapse of a number of vulnerable states could result in a loss of responsible control over weapons of mass destruction, trigger contagious extremism, place the continued distribution of critical resources at risk, or spark combustible social upheaval that would undermine the security and governance of entire regions. The most dangerous of these circumstances will demand American-led responses; preferably before they reach crisis proportions. Some will present immediate, obvious security challenges to the United States. Others will challenge the United States more subtly in the near-term, but will grow in severity over time. Each remaining unchecked will increasingly defy all but the most extraordinary efforts to bring them under control.

The costs associated with these small wars and interventions transcend straightforward accounting. Their human, physical, fiscal, political, psychological, and even moral demands challenge what is proving to be a very vulnerable grand strategic center of gravity for the United States – the population and its willingness to accept the high price of great power. Indeed, political elites and opinion leaders must either inure the body politic to the costs associated with exercising great power or face the consequences of diminished U.S. influence.

Diminished influence leaves no guarantee of physical security and engenders great strategic costs. For example, the most virulent of our irregular challengers oppose both our physical, as well as our political, commercial, and cultural influence. Further, American primacy underwrites the sanctity of responsible sovereignty and the integrity of the global economy. Thus, a decline in U.S. influence is certain to see an increase in strategically significant intra- and interstate conflict; the irresponsible exercise of political authority; and serious challenges to economic well-being, growth, trade, and access to critical resources worldwide.

Iraq, Afghanistan, and the broader War on Terror are illustrative of our strategic future. Irregular conflicts were the business of past empires and now the burden of the world's only superpower. However, physical and psychological under-preparedness for their costs increasingly places long-term interests in jeopardy. As costs mount, policy elites are not only challenged to articulate the need for continued near-term sacrifice, but also the certainty that our global position will be equally burdensome well into the future. Today, the prospect of a slow voluntary retreat from dominant influence that might accompany popular underpreparedness and exhaustion challenges American primacy more than does any opponent's deliberate cost imposing strategy. The structural and material prerequisites of continued great power are secure. The will to employ them is substantially more vulnerable.