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America's Global Responsibility



The Nimitz Carrier Strike Group began operating in the South China Sea on Jan. 12, 2023. (Petty Officer 3rd Class Hannah Kantner/U.S. Navy)



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Commentary

Just as the war in Ukraine reaches a critical point and conflict engulfs the Middle East, voices across the United States are increasingly questioning U.S. involvement abroad.

Some politicians and the public seem to suggest that the United States should focus on its domestic problems at the exclusion of international issues. “What’s in it for us?” they ask. “Why should Americans care about—and fund—conflicts happening in far-off nations when we have so many problems at home to address?”

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Americans are right to question. The ability to openly debate government policy is one of the essential freedoms Americans and citizens of other democratic nations enjoy. But the debate, in this case, is far removed from the reality of the United States’s position in the world. Now, more than ever, American participation—and leadership—in international events is crucial, not only in maintaining the relative global stability established in the wake of World War II but also in ensuring that the freedom and prosperity of the United States and its allies continue into the future.

Let’s look at what the idea of the United States “solely taking care of its domestic problems” with no international involvement would look like. If we are to take this idea at face value, the United States would have to dismantle its overseas military bases and bring home its navy and military personnel stationed abroad. Under this scenario, there is no question as to what would ensue: the security enjoyed in much of the democratic world—including countries of Europe, Japan, and other areas of the Pacific and Middle East—would immediately be put in jeopardy.

In fact, I would argue that even a partial pullback would have serious consequences. In many cases, the simple presence of a U.S. aircraft carrier is enough to stem further conflict. During elections in Taiwan, for example, the United States has typically parked an aircraft carrier to the east of the island, sending a more-than-clear message to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to stay away.

On the reverse, not standing up appropriately at crucial moments has led to a drastic reduction in security in different regions. There was little substantive reaction to Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 or its annexation of Crimea in 2014, and little response besides hand-wringing as Russian President Vladimir Putin amassed troops on the Ukraine border in February 2022. In both cases, inaction sent the message that the United States and its allies were unprepared to prevent imminent invasion.

And when the United States has pulled out of strategic areas, authoritarians have wasted no time stepping in. This was the case in the 1990s when U.S. military bases in the Philippines were shuttered: the CCP quickly stepped into the power vacuum, taking over islands and reefs in the South China Sea. Should the United States call back its naval forces that still patrol those waters, the CCP would likely immediately attempt to control the Strait of Malacca, a sea lane through which over 90 percent of international shipping trade currently passes. If this critical route fell under authoritarian control, a global conflict—if not an outright war—would most certainly ensue.

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Some people feel that by supporting nations like Ukraine, we are hurting our chances against a rising communist China. I agree completely about the dangers of the CCP. But it is a mistake to think that by turning away from democratic nations, we will somehow form a stronger bulwark against the CCP. On the contrary, giving up on places like Ukraine will send a message to the CCP that the United States doesn't extend its hand to other democracies (or only does it half-heartedly), including our democratic ally, Taiwan. We simply cannot let this happen.

Authoritarians everywhere would be more than pleased if the United States pulled back from its obligations abroad. But Americans should not take the bait from dictators who paint their atrocities in obfuscating colors. The United States is not perfect, and without question, it has issues at home to resolve and work through. But there is simply no other nation that can step in to take over America's role in the world. While tyrants continue to rampage, the United States must continue to engage and lead.

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