

The Sinews of Peace Revised

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E-Notes

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The recent visit by British Prime Minister Theresa May to the White House included a photo opportunity of her and President Donald Trump beside the famous bust of Winston Churchill, now returned to a prominent spot in the Oval Office. This image brings to mind the visit of her distinguished predecessor to America long ago in Fulton, Missouri. In 1946, Winston

Churchill came to America to advise a novice President Truman about America's obligations to the world. In his talk, titled "[The Sinews of Peace](#)," the pugnaciously eloquent Churchill urged the United States to lead the English-speaking world to support peace and avoid a third world war. That speech is well remembered for its reference to the "iron curtain" drawn over Europe, and [Churchill sought](#) to ensure that America would not become complacent nor turn inward. "For with primacy in power is also joined an awe inspiring accountability to the future," he intoned, adding. "If you look around you, you must feel not only the sense of duty done but also you must feel anxiety lest you fall below the level of achievement."



British Prime Minister Theresa May (left) and President of the United States Donald Trump (right) (Source: left, Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office)

Prime Minister May's visit should encourage Americans to reflect on our invaluable relationship with the United Kingdom and the need to work with like-minded nations to advance our common interests. It should also remind U.S. policymakers of the lessons that history has taught us about geopolitical competition, ideological movements, and the costs of complacent thinking. The new Trump administration does not measure itself against the levels of achievement set in the last 70 years; it seeks a revised approach. But it, nonetheless, will find that it must reinvest in the Sinews of Peace if it wants to reestablish the United States' prominence.

This is surely no time for complacency or turning inward or going it alone.

The Strategic Turning Point

The President's brief but dark Inaugural Address laid out Mr. Trump's worldview and emphasis on rebuilding America's core strengths. The speech did little to assuage concerns from our longstanding allies and partners overseas. His speech came off as unilateralist if not isolationist, promising to focus on "America First" without mentioning our international standing or commitments to friends and allies. The stark emphasis on economic nationalism seems to overturn 70 years of U.S. foreign policy and has led to claims that [Mr. Trump is deliberately unravelling](#) the world order. The orthodoxy of our foreign policy establishment will soon be challenged on each major

assumption laid down since 1947.

Our strategy has been relatively consistent for decades.[1] That strategy has had inflection points, particularly during the Reagan era.[2] But overall, we have shaped the environment and promoted an international order conducive to our interests and safely protected our key allies. We have dampened the forces that have produced competitors seeking advantage through military means. “It has been the great accomplishment of the U.S.-led world order in the 70 years since the end of the Second World War,” notes [Brookings Robert Kagan](#), “that this kind of competition has been held in check and great power conflicts have been avoided.”

The 2016 electoral debates suggested that a robust international role may not be politically sustainable. [Poll findings](#) depict an American populace weary and wary of foreign entanglements. The costs for U.S. leadership and engagement abroad compete with domestic priorities, and demand for a period of domestic renewal may be growing. [Some argue](#) that such renewal is strategically necessary or useful.[3]

President Trump has signaled a disinclination to preserve America’s existing leadership role in sustaining the global order. His campaign was framed by a platform suggesting a much narrower definition of American interests, with our global leadership unshackled by existing treaties and trade agreements. His strategy calls for prioritizing our American interests through a contracted lens that supports U.S. national economic interests and those of our individual citizens. This policy is not a strategic view that will continue to underwrite the rules of an international order and lead an alliance system, all while preserving the independence of democratic states and denying regional hegemony to autocratic states.

Mr. Trump’s unique combination of unilateralism and transactionalism suggests an approach that radically alters U.S. leadership of the post-Cold War international system and creates the conditions for a destabilizing period of uncertainty in many regions of the world. His remarks have suggested that preserving the liberal international order is not a priority, or even a vital interest. He has created a strong impression that no longer would the United States unilaterally assume the role as the global policeman or the guarantor of last resort of the current world order. His inaugural speech called for remaining a shining beacon, but more of a *Promised Land* than a *Crusader State*. [4]

His policy would result in less extensive U.S. engagement in each of the world’s regions, and it suggests an American military posture that is less engaged and not stationed forward.

Some scholars, defenders of the Establishment grand strategy, find fault with the implications of Mr. Trump’s orientation. [Robert Kagan at Brookings warns](#):

Coming as it does at a time of growing great power competition, this new approach in American foreign policy is likely to hasten a return to the instability and clashes of previous eras. These external challenges to the liberal world order and the continuing weakness and fracturing of the liberal world from within are likely to feed on each other. The weakness of the liberal core and the abdication by the United States of its global responsibilities will encourage more aggressive revisionism by the dissatisfied powers.

His concerns are echoed by [Professor Hal Brands of Johns Hopkins University](#), who accused Mr. Trump of displaying “fierce hostility to the alliances that protected U.S. interests and international security throughout the postwar era, building on the [disparaging](#) comments he had made toward key U.S. allies such as Germany.”

Trump’s Grand Strategy

President Trump’s comments notwithstanding, the new administration has not had sufficient time to define and articulate a [comprehensive grand strategy](#). Such a strategy will take some time to develop, and work on it has only

just begun.

Whatever grand strategy emerges from the numerous threads that have begun to take form inside the Trump administration need to be founded in a realistic appraisal of the security context we must operate within. The problem is that, as we found during the Obama administration, vacuums are not always filled with benign actors.[5] According to our intelligence community, any perception of U.S. disengagement is likely to produce an increased chance of interstate conflict.[6] Outlier states that do not accept the extant international order will almost surely perceive opportunities to force a change to that order.

Traditional or establishment strategists will seek to reestablish America as the singular military power. That would be an expensive and possibly counterproductive move. The unique “[unipolar moment](#)” of the early 90s was just that, a fleeting window or passing stage of history. Seeking to recapture it, some want to execute a Reagan style defense buildup, adding tens of billions of dollars for new aircraft carriers, armored divisions, advanced jets, and submarines. What is now needed, however, is a truly [different strategy that helps us navigate more efficiently](#) in “the more diversified, pluralistic system that is now materializing.”

Several authors have offered thoughtful strategic options: [Discriminate Power](#) and [Prudent Realism](#). All of these have merit, and all seek to guide U.S. foreign policy with humility and prudence. I have argued for greater flexibility, partnerships, and more [strategic discipline](#) in the application of U.S. military power and contend that sustained global presence and reaffirmed commitments to our Allies and formal partners will do more to deter aggression and maintain peace than withdrawing into disengaged unilateralism.[7]

Alliance Architecture

The Sinews of Peace in the 21st century will have to extend beyond Churchill’s Anglo-Saxon based concept. But the new team at the White House does not share its predecessors’ sustained appreciation for the contribution made by our alliance system. Mr. Trump’s statements have cast even more uncertainty in European ministries by suggesting that U.S. obligations under Article V of the NATO Treaty were less than ironclad, and somewhat transactional. His description of NATO as “obsolete” surely brought glee to Moscow and its designs. In Europe, these comments “[caused astonishment](#).” In Asia, our apparent lack of commitment to our allies in general, our withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and critiques of climate change and nonproliferation agreements have created vacuums. Cabinet members have sought to reassure our current allies that we will remain committed to them and that we will even forge new alliances. But the seeds of doubt and division are now planted.

Overall, we appear to be sending mixed messages. NATO is both important and “obsolete.” America wants to negotiate new and better trade agreements, but does not live up to the agreements it has signed to date. We have signed security agreements that we may or not live up to. At the same time, we are suggesting, if not a more isolated America, certainly one that is less interested in maintaining the burden of leadership. Rather than isolationist, it comes off more unilateralist, as if “America First” and “American Alone” were synonymous.

There are numerous reasons to retain a viable and [cohesive alliance system](#), as long as the [burdens and benefits are shared](#). Over 15 years ago, many U.S. allies stepped forward after 9/11 and contributed in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Over a thousand soldiers and aid workers from our allies have been killed in these campaigns. We should recognize these contributions, not belittle them. There is no doubt that these alliances [can be and should be revitalized](#). At present, we have left our closest [allies with the conclusion that](#) “At best the road ahead for NATO will be rocky, at worst we may be seeing the destruction of the most significant military alliance in history.”

Not everyone in the Trump administration overlooks the value of collective security. During a speech last fall, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Joseph Dunford, argued America’s ability to project power and “the credibility of our alliances” represent the “centers of gravity” from which the [U.S. military draws strength](#). Mr. Mattis, in his initial message to the military just as he took office, stated that “Recognizing that no nation is secure without friends, we will work with the State Department to strengthen our alliances.” There is a lot of wisdom packed into that terse

statement.

If “America First” becomes “America Alone,” we will live in a world that is more hostile to American values and its most vital interests. This policy will require us to build up our forces, not to restore collective defense, but to make up for the allies and future partners we have shunned. There can be little doubt that this debate alone has actually undercut our own [security and sowed much doubt around the globe](#).

Peace through Strength

The administration has made it clear that it will seek to reestablish American power. While the United States retains enormous strategic advantages and sizable military forces, its relative military superiority is declining. The overall size of the U.S. military has been declining along with its qualitative edge for some time now. Explicit in the search for technological breakthroughs, the so-called Offset Strategy, is an admission of fading military superiority.[8]

Mr. Trump’s plans to rebuild the U.S. military seek to offset this reduced stature, along with the credibility and leadership of the United States. Notwithstanding his focus on the domestic economy, he has established “peace through strength” as a major principle for the rebuilding of American power. The administration recognizes that “Our military needs every asset at its disposal to defend America. We cannot allow other nations to surpass our military capability.” In fact, disabling sequestration and funding the military’s dried up readiness and modernization accounts is now long overdue. Within a few months of assuming office, we can expect the [President to submit a new budget to Congress](#) outlining a plan to rebuild our military, in order to “provide our military leaders with the means to plan for our future defense needs.”

As with the Reagan administration, having a big stick can promote deterrence and change an opponent’s behavior. There are strong arguments that regaining a margin of preponderance across a broadening set of threats is sorely needed.[9] A significant peacetime buildup improved [Reagan’s negotiating position](#) and was part of a larger strategic approach to reducing tensions.

Reestablishing our force is needed, but the resources for such a buildup will need to be identified soon along with a smart plan that will posture the Armed Forces for the 21st century. A rapid buildup that merely reconstructs the 1990s military will not be sufficient. Some short-term growth in the deficit may result, but that seems a reasonable risk to our economic solvency given the alternative. A more competitive America needs both a stronger economy and a more robust military. “Peace through strength” is not simply a mantra, but a guiding principle that if properly operationalized will produce a stronger and more sustainable economy and a military that is not simply larger but also modernized to defeat tomorrow’s threats, not yesterday’s.

“Peace through strength” should also be expanded to consider the valuable inputs of allies to our security, something we can promote constructively.[10] While the Pentagon’s extensive efforts to exploit the vaunted “Third Offset Strategy” should be continued, we should acknowledge that the first offset was the Grand Alliance of World War II. The second offset strategy was the rolling development of NATO and the implementation of the Marshall Plan, supplemented by our efforts to develop West Germany’s armed forces. These coalition efforts successfully offset the imbalance in military power with diplomatic and economic dimensions. Given the challenges we face today with strategic solvency, a more comprehensive approach will again be needed.

Moreover, the envisioned growth in both the capacity of our military and the technological capabilities it develops must be driven by a national security strategy that does not yet exist. The Trump administration needs to establish the vector as well as the size for the military, along with other instruments of power. Additionally, it needs to establish specific priorities and assess what risks will then have to be accepted. In short, “MAGA” is not sufficient for strategic guidance.

Conclusion

There is an ongoing debate about America's role in the world and about how our alliances play a role in securing our desired end state. If we seek to "Make America Great Again," it will be in the face of concerted efforts by several autocratic powers to undermine the existing international order and our global interests. This goal will not be countered simply by signing a set of Executive Orders. Renewing the "sinews of peace" and sustaining a coherent alliance system will be needed. This is not for the intellectually incurious, or the impatient. Here again, [Churchill offers insight](#), "Our difficulties and dangers will not be removed by closing our eyes to them. They will not be removed by mere waiting to see what happens; nor will they be removed by a policy of appeasement."

We can argue about Alternative Facts, but it is clear we need an Alternative Strategy. But we cannot make America great again by hiding from the burdens of protecting our interests and friends, by failing to enlist the support of such friends, or by not pushing back on malign forces in the world. If Churchill's bust in the Oval Office serves only to remind us of that, compared to the debacle of Neville Chamberlain's tragic tenure, all the better.

[1] Richard. D. Hooker, Jr., "The Grand Strategy of the United States," Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, October 2014.

[2] Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), pp. 274–335.

[3] For a response see Colin Dueck, "The Strategy of Retrenchment and Its Consequences," *FPRI E-Note*, April 13, 2015.

[4] Walter McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State, The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

[5] Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine, American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015)

[6] National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 2012), p. viii.

[7] Frank Hoffman, "Forward Partnership, A Sustainable American Strategy," *Orbis*, Vol. 57, No. 1, Winter 2013), 20–40.

[8] Ashton Carter, Remarks On Opening DIUx East and Announcing the Defense Innovation Board, As Delivered, Cambridge, Massachusetts, July 26, 2016; Robert Work, speech, as delivered, Reagan Defense Forum: "The Third Offset Strategy," Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA, Nov. 7, 2015; Robert Work, "The Third U.S. Offset Strategy and Its Implications for Partners and Allies," speech at the Willard Hotel, Washington, DC, January 28, 2015.

[9] Eliot A. Cohen, *Big Stick, The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force*, New York: Basic Books, 2016.

[10] For specific recommendations see John R. Deni, "Still the One? The Role of Europe in American Defense Strategy," *Orbis*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter 2016), 36–51.