Tough economic times have often been met in the United States by calls for a more modest foreign policy. But despite the global economic downturn, in today's interdependent world, retrenchment would be misguided. The United States' ability to lead the international community is still invaluable and unmatched. Its economy is still by far the largest, most developed, and most dynamic in the world. Its military remains much more capable than any other. The United States' network of alliances and partnerships ensures that the country rarely has to act alone. And its soft power reflects the sustained appeal of American values. The United States should not reduce its overseas engagement when it is in a position to actively shape the global environment to secure its interests.

Preserving the United States' unique standing and leadership will require revitalizing the American economy, the foundation of the nation's power. It will also require smart engagement with the rest of the world to create the conditions that are essential to economic recovery and growth, namely, stability and uninterrupted trade. For decades, those have been underwritten by the forward engagement of U.S. forces and by robust networks of alliances. For example, a sustained U.S. military presence in Europe and Asia, along with healthy diplomatic and economic ties to allies there, has reaped decades of peace.
and prosperity for the United States and the world. Bringing most of those forces home would be detrimental to U.S. national security and economic recovery.

Nevertheless, fundamental changes in the international strategic environment have brought the United States to a strategic inflection point, requiring a recalibration of the United States' global military posture. The rise of China and India is shifting the power dynamics in Asia and the world at large. Transnational threats, such as terrorism and proliferation, pose new collective challenges. The global commons—the maritime, air, space, and cyberspace domains—are increasingly congested and contested. And with the end of the Iraq war and the planned 2014 transition in Afghanistan, the United States is nearing the end of a decade of ground wars in the Middle East and South Asia.

In response to these changes, in 2009 the Obama administration launched a major review of the U.S. global military posture to determine how to make it more strategically sound, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable. The review is ongoing but has already yielded a number of new initiatives, such as a shift away from the Cold War orientation of U.S. forces in Europe and a reinvigoration of the United States' partnerships in Asia. These moves reflect the fact that with the war in Iraq over and the transition in Afghanistan under way, the United States must focus American leadership on addressing emerging threats and preventing conflict and on securing a better future through partnership and engagement.

THE LOGIC OF SUSTAINED FORWARD ENGAGEMENT

DURING THE Pentagon's last global posture review, in 2004, then U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's guiding principle was closing overseas bases and bringing home U.S. troops stationed abroad. In contrast, the Obama administration has emphasized making the country's forward posture more efficient and effective. American forces stationed abroad should be aiming to prevent conflict, build the capacity of key partners, maintain core alliances, and ensure the U.S. military's ability to secure American interests in critical regions. Forward engagement, as this approach is called, does not mean policing the world or letting other countries free-ride on U.S. security guarantees. And partnership does not mean relinquishing American sovereignty to regional and international institutions. Rather, forward engagement means leveraging the United States' biggest strength, the ability to lead, while encouraging others to share the burden.

The cornerstone of forward engagement will be positioning U.S. troops in vital regions to help deter major conflicts and promote stability, particularly in Asia and the Middle East. As the long-term U.S. deployments in Europe and Asia have demonstrated, the physical presence of military forces sends a powerful message to potential adversaries. Some believe that troops garrisoned at home are just as
effective a deterrent, given the global reach and technological superiority of the U.S. armed forces. But that argument, which was the cornerstone of Rumsfeld's posture vision, ignores the realities of time, distance, logistics, and politics. As the United States' experience in the two Iraq wars demonstrated, it takes weeks, if not months, to deploy a force of the size and strength required for some of the most likely and most dangerous scenarios the United States could face around the world. Furthermore, moving troops from the United States to a conflict zone just as tensions begin to rise can exacerbate or escalate a crisis.

Forward-postured forces also reassure allies of the United States' commitment to their security. On the Korean Peninsula, for example, the presence of some 28,000 U.S. personnel reminds Seoul that the United States stands ready to defend South Korea against North Korean aggression. Further south, U.S. naval and air forces engaged in Australia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand give allies in Southeast Asia greater confidence that the United States will not abandon the region at a time of great change and uncertainty.

Should deterrence fail, forward-stationed military forces are well placed to facilitate a collective response. As the recent NATO operation in Libya showed, responding to threats requires guaranteed access to supply routes and bases, diplomatic support, and, ideally, the help of allies in the field. Quickly assembling a posse to get the bad guys might have worked in old Westerns, but it does not work in complex, high-tech military operations. For those, common-command-and-control protocols, interoperable technologies, doctrines, and planning processes should be developed well in advance. And more than any other forces, forward-stationed forces can spearhead those preparations. They can conduct regular training exercises with allies to identify and correct shortfalls, build trust among U.S. and allied service members, and develop the shared practices that make the militaries work together more effectively in the field.

Another good reason for forces to remain engaged abroad, even in peacetime, is to serve as an investment in burden sharing. Training and conducting real-world missions with allies and partners, such as the United States’ multilateral antipiracy operations off the Horn of Africa aid its freedom-of-navigation exercises in the Persian Gulf, helps build up their capacities. Such engagement also promotes a shared vision of the world, in which the rule of law dominates, disputes can be resolved without the use of force, and commerce flows freely. In turn, such partners: are more able to address problems at home without the need for U.S. forces. Such relatively small investments in peacetime activities can mean not having to put American men and women in harm’s way later.
Forward engagement is not only an effective way to safeguard U.S. national security interests; it is also a responsible and efficient way to position U.S. forces in a time of economic constraint. The political scientists Joseph Parent and Paul MacDonald argued in these pages ("The Wisdom of Retrenchment," November/December 2011) that closing U.S. overseas bases and bringing U.S. personnel home would save billions of dollars. Such an argument misunderstands how U.S. armed forces are sustained abroad and underestimates the expense of relocating them. The United States has 1.4 million men and women in uniform. All of them, and their families, must be housed and trained somewhere. It is not necessarily cheaper to do that in the United States, especially since some countries, including Germany, Japan, and South Korea, help foot the bill for U.S. facilities stationed there. Furthermore, it would be a colossal misallocation of resources to abandon significant capital investments—for example, the world-class U.S. Army training center in Hohenfels, Germany—only to build duplicate facilities at home.

The United States should position its forces to provide national security in the most efficient and responsible way possible. In the coming years, the U.S. military will likely be operating in a tight budget environment, but Washington can get more for less by positioning a larger percentage of its forces in key regions. Take, for example, the rotation cycles of U.S. naval ships. For every ship out securing sea-lanes or deterring aggression, there are three others in various stages of maintenance or in transit. Porting ships closer to their areas of operation in Europe or Asia would save each vessel three to four weeks in transit time and would require keeping one-third fewer ships in U.S. inventories. That alone would save billions of dollars in acquisition, operations, and maintenance costs. Similarly, the strategic forward stationing of U.S. forces, combined with periodic rotations by U.S. forces to train with allies, makes the best use of American resources, enhances cooperation and burden sharing, and ensures that the military is positioned and ready to respond to emerging threats and crises.

**STRATEGIC REBALANCING**

AN OPTIMAL U.S. military posture must reflect the reality that resources will be limited in the coming years and that the United States simply cannot be present everywhere. With that in mind, the Obama administration's defense posture realignment will customize deployments based on the exigencies of each region and U.S. priorities.

The most significant shift will be toward the Asia-Pacific region. President Barack Obama has made clear that the United States is "a Pacific nation" and that it will "play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future." His emphasis is reflected in the Defense Department's January 2012 "strategic guidance" document, which states that "U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to
developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia."

Accordingly, as U.S. responsibilities in Afghanistan wind down, the country's attention and resources, both diplomatic and military, will begin to concentrate more on the Asia-Pacific region. The American presence in Japan and South Korea will remain a cornerstone of this strategy, even as the United States builds up its relationships with other Asian nations, especially those in and around Southeast Asia. Already, last November, Obama and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced plans for enhanced U.S.-Australian military cooperation, including sending up to 2,500 U.S. marines to Australia for joint training and exercises, increasing visits by U.S. aircraft to northern Australian airfields, and conducting more calls by U.S. ships to various Australian ports.

The United States is also planning to deploy two new Littoral Combat Ships, small vessels designed to operate close to shore, from Singapore and is exploring enhanced military cooperation with the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. The details are still under discussion, but this cooperation will likely include more joint exercises, troop rotations, and ship visits. Throughout the region, new bilateral and multilateral training programs, especially those geared toward humanitarian relief, disaster preparedness, interoperability, and capacity building, will help the region better counter transnational threats, prevent conflict, and respond to crises.

In the Indian Ocean region, through which 70 percent of the world's petroleum products and 25 percent of global commerce sail, the United States is also deepening its partnerships. The Indian military now conducts more exercises with the U.S. military than with any other. The United States has also enhanced its security cooperation with India by selling New Delhi advanced military systems, such as c-130, p-81, and c-17 aircraft.

Finally, Obama has made clear that after the drawdown of U.S. forces in Afghanistan in 2014, the United States does not intend to keep any permanent U.S. bases there. However, the strategic partnership agreement that Washington and Kabul concluded in May laid the groundwork for a long-term security relationship between the two countries. Making good on that commitment will almost certainly involve deploying a smaller number of U.S. forces to Afghanistan on a rotational basis. Those troops will support joint counterterrorism efforts and continue to help build the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces. Meanwhile, the United States will no longer depend as heavily on the Northern Distribution Network, which runs across the Baltic states and through Central Asia and which NATO set up to keep its troops in Afghanistan supplied. Even so, the United States should seek to maintain cooperative
relationships with as many of the network's states as possible, given the strategic flexibility these relationships provide in a region that lies at the crossroads between Europe and Asia.

NEW MIDDLE EAST

FOR THE past ten years, the United States' military posture in South Asia and the Middle East has been shaped by large, protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the future, the U.S. presence in the region should be lighter but easy to quickly scale up. It should focus on underwriting the United States' security commitments to its partners, ensuring the free flow of commerce, countering violent extremism, deterring Iran, and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The United States' commitment to the security of Israel is unbreakable. In addition to helping ensure Israel's qualitative military edge, the U.S. military should continue to work closely with Israeli forces to make sure that their defenses keep pace with emerging threats. In recent years, this has involved the joint development of missile defense systems. In the future, it will involve sharing the United States' most sophisticated systems, such as the Joint Strike Fighter, with the Israeli military.

The United States' strategic posture in the Middle East must be credible enough to deter threats to stability, such as Iran, without overstepping the bounds of host nations' tolerance for the presence of foreign forces. The United States will thus continue to deploy its troops on a rotational basis. Instead of maintaining permanent installations, U.S. air and naval forces will likely spend stints in Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and, potentially, Iraq. These deployments will demonstrate the United States’ sustained commitment to its Arab partners and will help them address shared threats.

The United States can and should play a central role in fostering regional cooperation to address other common challenges, as well. For example, given the proliferation of ballistic missiles in the region, the United States should continue to place particular emphasis on working with partners, or groups of partners, to develop and deploy missile defense systems. Ideally, the United States could build on the robust bilateral missile defense cooperation it has with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to create a more effective regional missile defense architecture.

The United States should also continue to coordinate regional efforts to counter piracy, combat terrorism, and protect freedom of navigation in and around the Persian Gulf. For example, the U.S. Navy in Bahrain currently provides the physical infrastructure and leadership for a 25-member combined maritime task force, which is focused on ensuring safe passage for commercial ships through the Persian Gulf, the
Strait of Hormuz, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean. Such activities help ensure the free flow of trade and oil and promote burden sharing by building up the skills of regional partners.

Looking to the future, the United States would be wise to consider how the political changes sweeping the region may alter its security relationships there. Military-to-military engagements with the region’s rising democracies should promote the development of civilian-led security forces committed to upholding human rights and the rule of law. Strong U.S. security cooperation with the militaries of countries going through democratic transitions, most notably Egypt, can provide both a degree of stability in the bilateral relationships and some leverage to influence those governments at a time of profound change. Nevertheless, the United States must be prepared to adapt and adjust its military engagement with these countries as new governments emerge, based on assessments of both the nature and the actions of those governments, the degree to which U.S. interests and strategies in the region overlap with theirs, and their willingness to partner with the United States.

A FORWARD-LOOKING FORWARD POSTURE

As THE United States recalibrates its global military posture, it must continue to work closely with its NATO allies. At a time when most of Europe is slashing its defense budgets, the United States must remain deeply engaged to make sure its partners there still shoulder their share of the collective defense burden. A decade of military operations in Afghanistan strengthened NATO'S fighting skills and enhanced its ability to cooperate at the political level, which was absolutely critical to its timely and unified response in Libya. But, as Ivo Daalder, the U.S. permanent representative to NATO, and James Stavridis, NATO’S supreme allied commander for Europe, recently observed in these pages ("NATO'S Victory in Libya," March/April 2012), the Libya mission also revealed the need to improve high-end interoperability. To keep the alliance healthy, the United States will need to make an effort to improve NATO’S coordinated targeting and planning. Members of the alliance will need to invest in updated capabilities and commit to sustained integrated training.

The security and stability of Europe no longer require the number of U.S. ground forces currently stationed there. The Obama administration's new defense posture will address this imbalance. Two heavy brigades, formations of about 3,500 soldiers each, will be taken out of the region, leaving a Stryker and an airborne brigade, both of which are lighter and more agile, to train with allied ground forces. The reduction will be offset by a greater U.S. contribution to the NATO Response Force, a multinational land, air, maritime, and special operations force that is ready for swift deployment.
The United States will also allocate an additional U.S.-based army battalion for regular training rotations from the United States to Europe. Meanwhile, the United States will leverage its comparative advantage in high-end capabilities, for example, by applying the president's phased and adaptive approach to European ballistic missile defense and providing command-and-control infrastructure, technology for training, and airlift and air-refueling capabilities.

Finally, in other regions, where few U.S. forces are permanently stationed, the United States' day-to-day military posture will be tailored to address high-priority missions, such as countering violent extremism and halting illicit trafficking. As the Defense Department's new strategic guidance made clear, in these regions, "whenever possible, we will develop innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to achieve our security objectives, relying on exercises, rotational presence, and advisory capabilities."

In Africa, for example, the military can expect to routinely deploy small Special Forces teams to work with partners on counterterrorism. In the Americas, U.S. forces will continue to train with their counterparts in Mexico and Colombia and throughout Central America to stanch the drug trade. Elsewhere, small contingents of U.S. military personnel should continue supporting local law enforcement agencies in their efforts to enhance the rule of law. And in dozens of countries, the United States will maintain the State Partnership Program, through which a given U.S. state's National Guard develops a long-term relationship with the military of a foreign country to help build the military's capacity through joint activities. The United States' global posture will be backed by ready and capable forces at home, which will be available for routine foreign deployments, from the Arctic to the Horn of Africa.

Obama's strategic realignment rightly recognizes the role that the U.S. military plays in promoting stability and securing U.S. national interests around the world. A sustained U.S. military presence in key regions has ensured global stability and strengthened the armed forces of many partner countries. Protecting U.S. interests now and in the future will also require long-term, strategic forward engagement. At this inflection point, the president must resist calls for retrenchment and continue to champion the United States' unique leadership role in the world.

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