

Musclebound: The limits of U.S. power

By Stephen M. Walt



Operation Desert Fox: A U.S. destroyer launches a cruise missile from the Persian Gulf.

THE END OF THE COLD WAR LEFT THE UNITED STATES in a position of preponderance unsurpassed since the Roman Empire. It has the world's largest and most advanced economy, and its military forces now dwarf those of any other country. Although the collapse of the

Soviet Union left it without a major rival, the United States continues to spend more on defense than the next five largest military powers *combined*. English is the language of choice in science and in world business, American media and popular culture are increasingly pervasive,

and the ideals of free market democracy have found new converts around the world. The international position of the United States may not be perfect, but Americans could hardly ask for much more.

Yet this extraordinary position of power does not guarantee that the United States can achieve its foreign policy objectives. Wherever one looks, in fact, there is abundant evidence of the limits of U.S. influence. In the Middle East, for example, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has stagnated despite repeated U.S. prodings and President Bill Clinton's personal intervention at Wye Plantation. In Iraq, neither eight years of crippling economic sanctions nor a punishing series of U.S. air strikes have been able to remove Saddam Hussein from power, and the inspections regime established at the end of the 1991 Gulf War is now in tatters.

In the Balkans, the peace agreement negotiated at Dayton has failed to quell ethnic suspicions and only the continued presence of NATO troops prevents a new round of ethnic blood-

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shed. The situation looks even worse in Kosovo, where the cease-fire arranged by U.S. envoy Richard Holbrooke in October 1998 is unraveling rapidly, and the killing continues.

In Asia, explicit U.S. warnings and the threat of economic sanctions failed to halt India's and Pakistan's decision to test nuclear weapons; meanwhile, China continues to ignore U.S. concerns about its human rights practices and its sales of sensitive military technology.

Relations between the United States and Russia remain edgy at best, and Moscow has re-emerged as a persistent critic of U.S. policies in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Balkans. All things considered, being the world's sole superpower may not be so wonderful after all.

If the United States is so powerful, then why

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doesn't it get its way more often? Is it due to a failure of will, as some of President Clinton's critics contend, or is it the result of pursuing the wrong goals at the wrong time with the wrong strategy? If the United States is really the "one indispensable power," to use Madeleine Albright's self-flattering phrase, then why does its recent track record seem so discouraging?

The belief that the United States is both all powerful and impotent rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of power in international politics. For starters, the United States does get its way a good deal of the time, but Americans rarely notice when other states do what the United States wants without making a fuss about it. Focusing on the most difficult or persistent problems inevitably understates U.S. influence, because it ignores all the problems that were avoided because other states followed the U.S. lead, and it omits all the disputes that have already been resolved.

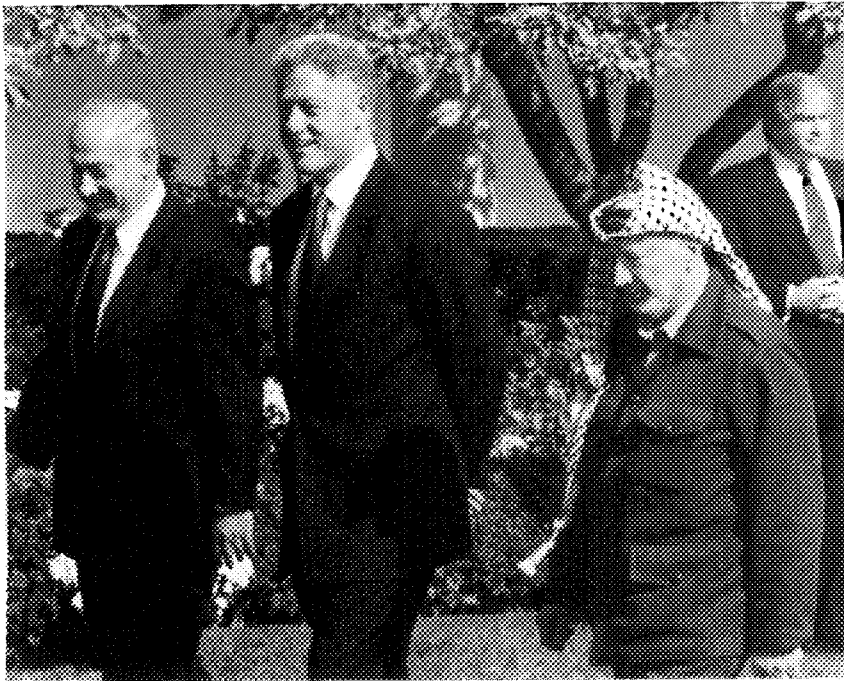
More important, the inability of the United States to get its way on every issue should not be surprising, because that is not how power works in the international system. Being bigger and stronger gives a state more influence, to be sure, in the sense that strong states can do more to weaker states than weaker states can do to them. Thus, the United States has a larger overall impact on world affairs than, say, Bolivia, Pakistan, or Denmark.

Moreover, a powerful country like the United States can pursue a more ambitious range of goals than can a weaker state, and it will be better equipped to deal with unforeseen events. For these reasons, states prefer to be strong rather than weak.

Yet even the most powerful state in the world will not get its way on every issue and it may sometimes find itself thwarted at every turn. The reasons are many.

Who cares more?

One obvious reason why the United States does not always get its way is that other states care more about certain issues than the United States does. The United States lost the Vietnam War in large part because the North Vietnamese cared more about unifying their country than Americans cared about preventing unification. Similarly, the United States worries about the possibility that Iraq might acquire



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There are limits to U.S. influence: Despite President Clinton's personal intervention at Wye River Plantation, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process appears stalled.

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weapons of mass destruction, but it is a safe bet that Saddam Hussein cares more about Iraq's strategic situation than the United States does. He is willing to endure far more punishment than Americans are, just as Americans would be willing to run greater risks and bear greater costs if their security were more directly at stake.

In the same way, U.S. influence over Israel and the PLO is limited by the fact that they care more about the final peace terms than most Americans do. Both sides are willing to stand up to U.S. pressure when disputes arise, even if opposing the United States is costly.

The tendency for other states to care more than the United States does is a direct result of the favorable position the United States enjoys. In addition to being wealthier and stronger than any other state, the United States is insulated from the other major powers by two enormous oceans and protected by a large and robust nuclear deterrent. Although no state is perfectly safe from harm, the United States is easily the most secure great power in history. Other states

have to worry a lot about how certain issues are resolved; the United States can often take a more sanguine view.

That condition leads to something of a paradox: Although solving many global problems requires active U.S. involvement, Americans do not see them as vital to their own interests and they are unwilling to expend much effort addressing them. U.S. officials were visibly reluctant to send U.S. troops to the Balkans, and they were clearly aware that public support would evaporate if there were even a modest number of U.S. casualties. Similar concerns explain why economic sanctions and air strikes by *unmanned* cruise missiles have become the preferred tool of U.S. diplomacy. Americans would like to coerce others to do what they want, but they aren't willing to risk much blood or treasure to make sure they do.

This tendency is not caused by a lack of vision, leadership, or courage within the U.S. government. Rather, it is a direct result of the favorable international position that the United States now occupies. The reluctance to "bear any burden" also reveals the tacit recognition that the problems the United States is trying to solve may not be worth an extraordinary level of effort. The bottom line is clear: When other states care more about an issue than does the United

States, Washington won't use all the power at its disposal—and it will be less likely to get what it wants.

It's lonely at the top

A second reason why U.S. influence is less than one might expect follows from the familiar principle of the balance of power. In a world in which each state must ultimately provide for its own security, the most powerful state in the system will always appear at least somewhat threatening to others. This tendency will be muted if the strongest state appears to be fairly benevolent (and especially if its interests are generally compatible with those of the other major powers), but it never vanishes entirely. Even when a strong state seems relatively benevolent, other states may try to keep it from becoming even stronger and may band together to contain its influence.

The well-known tendency for states to "balance" against the strongest power helps explain why France and Russia have joined forces to

undercut U.S. efforts to pressure Iraq, and why Russia and China have been working to improve relations as well. The desire to free Europe from its subordination to the United States is one reason why many Europeans favor continued progress towards European economic and political union.

Efforts to balance against the United States have been restrained thus far. This is partly due to the legacy of good relations established during the Cold War, but an even more important factor is America's geographic separation from the other major powers. Just as the Atlantic and Pacific oceans have long protected the United States from potential rivals, they also protect the Eurasian powers from the possibility of U.S. domination. Although European and Asian elites may resent U.S. high-handedness and worry about American cultural hegemony, they don't have to worry about the United States conquering them militarily. Further, the United States has been a relatively well-behaved great power, which makes it less likely to provoke others into joining forces to keep it in check.

Nonetheless, there are growing differences between the United States and a number of its traditional allies, and these differences are partly the result of the preponderant U.S. position. For example, the United States has dragged its heels on many environmental issues, in part because it fears being forced to pay a disproportionate share of the costs. It also stood apart from its allies over the proposal to create an International Criminal Court to try human rights violators and over the treaty to ban landmines, largely because U.S. officials feared that these initiatives might impair their ability to meet important military commitments both now and in the future.

A similar desire to preserve its own superiority and freedom of action explains why the United States seeks to keep countries like India and Pakistan from acquiring their own nuclear arsenals, while steadfastly preserving its own nuclear deterrent and opposing proposals for NATO to adopt a no-first-use doctrine.

Other states are more willing to oppose U.S. policy because they have less need for U.S. protection. During the Cold War, for example, differences between the United States and its allies were muted by the larger objective of preserving Western unity in the face of the Soviet threat. Now that the Soviet Union is gone, traditional allies are more willing to line up against the United States when they do not agree with its position. Despite—or more precisely, *because*—the United States is so obviously the

biggest kid on the block, even its traditional allies may be looking for ways to keep U.S. power in check.

Dreaming impossible dreams

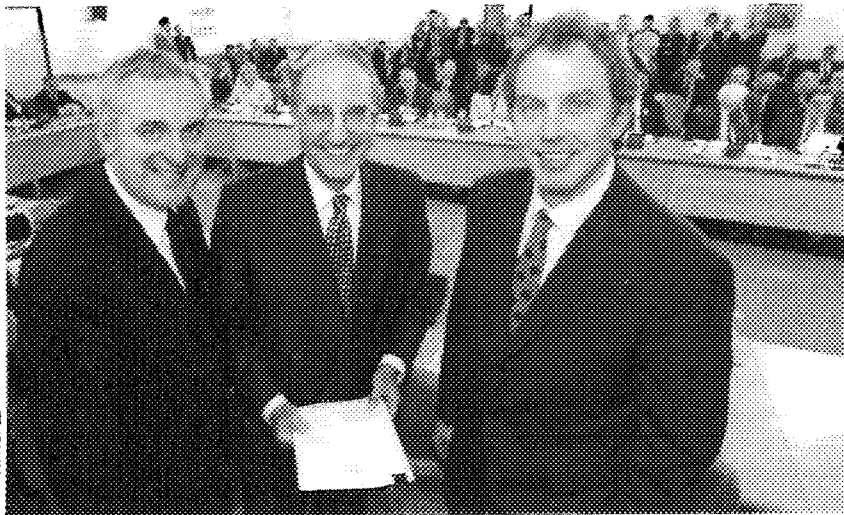
The apparent gap between U.S. power and U.S. influence also reflects the nature of the goals that American leaders have chosen to pursue. The euphoria that accompanied the end of the Cold War encouraged them to adopt an ambitious set of international objectives, and if anything that policy has intensified during the Clinton administration. Americans have always been inclined to remake the world in their own image, and that temptation is especially hard to resist when the United States seems to possess so many advantages.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has tried to broker a peace settlement between Israel and the PLO, sought to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons to other states (including several with active nuclear programs), and worked (successfully) to reduce the Russian nuclear arsenal and to disarm the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus.

It has also committed itself to expanding NATO eastward and enlarging the sphere of democratic rule around the world, and it has provided the military and diplomatic muscle behind the prolonged campaign to eliminate Iraq's residual weapons capability. Finally, the United States also took on the mission of trying to reconstitute a stable, multi-ethnic society in war-torn Bosnia, while simultaneously trying to foster a solution to the simmering conflict between Serbs and ethnic Albanians over Kosovo.

This is a breathtaking array of foreign policy goals, and some of them were clearly quixotic from the beginning. Take Bosnia, for instance. As John Mearsheimer, my colleague at the University of Chicago, has pointed out, history offers not a single case where contending ethnic groups have agreed to share power in the aftermath of a civil war. Yet the 1995 Dayton agreement committed the United States to achieving this historically unprecedented outcome.

In much the same way, the effort to deny nuclear weapons to states like Iraq, North Korea, India, and Pakistan flies in the face of the powerful norm of national sovereignty and it ignores the powerful incentives that each of these states has for acquiring such a capability. It is also transparently hypocritical, given U.S. reluctance to give up its own far larger nuclear arsenal. Slowing the spread of nuclear weapons is a



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But sometimes U.S. influence works: Former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell, shown here with Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, helped broker a peace agreement for Northern Ireland.

good idea, and U.S. policy has clearly helped achieve this goal, but it is not surprising that it did not achieve 100 percent success.

Knitting with one hand, unraveling with the other

The U.S. position as the sole superpower creates a final constraint on the effective exercise of U.S. influence. The United States is actively engaged in an enormous array of issues and in virtually every area of the globe. As just noted, many U.S. objectives are quite ambitious, and one would probably expect a low success rate under the best of circumstances. Unfortunately, given the number of goals the United States is trying to pursue, it is virtually inevitable that its efforts in one area will undermine its efforts somewhere else.

For example, the U.S.-led campaign to expand NATO is intended to help to defuse potential tensions within Europe and to nurture the new democracies in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. This is a laudable goal, but it directly undermines the equally laudable goal of improving relations with Russia and the related objective of obtaining Russian adherence to the START II arms control agreement. A similar example is the contradiction between U.S. efforts to promote trade with China, its desire to improve human rights conditions there, and its equally strong desire to build a more cordial political relationship with the Chinese government.

In the same way, U.S. leaders are strongly committed to supporting Israel, yet they also want to hasten a peace settlement, which requires putting pressure on Israel. They also want to avoid becoming the target of terrorist attacks, which are partly a reaction to close U.S. ties with Israel. No matter what the United

States does, it will be difficult to achieve all these objectives simultaneously.

All states face tradeoffs between different goals, but they are likely to be more numerous and more complicated for a state that has its fingers in lots of different global problems. Paradoxically, America's extraordinary capacity for action is sometimes self-defeating. The more successful it is in one area, the more elusive success becomes somewhere else.

How much is enough?

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, many Americans rejoiced at the prospect of a "new world order" in which international conflict would be consigned to the dustbin of history. Instead of debating which weapons to buy, national security experts began to discuss how the country could convert defense industries and spend the anticipated "peace dividend."

Some eight years later, the much-ballyhooed "end of history" has yet to materialize. Although defense spending and weapons levels have fallen steadily since 1989, international conflict did not cease and U.S. military forces have been extremely busy. Indeed, President Clinton recently proposed the first real increase in U.S. defense spending since the Reagan era, to ensure that the United States could still meet its current level of commitments. Americans are discovering what other imperial powers learned long ago: the world is a complicated and messy place and trying to run it is a costly and difficult business.

This situation raises awkward questions for those who simultaneously believe that the United States is still spending too much on its military and that U.S. foreign policy should seek more than the pursuit of selfish national interests. International influence cannot be had on the cheap, and those who want to use U.S. power to deter aggression, halt genocide, or discourage proliferation will have to provide U.S. leaders with the means to ensure that their voice is heard and their actions are felt. In doing so, however, they must remember that even enormous advantages in relative power will not get the United States everything it wants.

Similarly, those who favor continued reductions in U.S. military power must confront the fact that U.S. influence would be even smaller if this policy were followed. Reasonable people can disagree about which course the United States should take; but we should begin by recognizing that there is a very clear choice to be made. ■