

ISSUE BRIEF

Superpartner: A US Strategy for a Complex World

JANUARY 2017 ALEX WARD

The Trump administration should not take up its work under the assumption that the United States, with only 5 percent of the world's population and around a quarter of the world's economy, can continue to be an indispensable presence on the world stage.¹ America's relative decline since 1945 seems to be a byproduct of the post-World War II system it created along with its allies and partners, in which the United States worked to bring millions out of poverty, give other nations incentives to strengthen their governance structures and institutions, and establish global norms of behavior. That effort sought to ensure no worldwide conflicts recurred. However, fostering an environment where states, groups, and individuals could be further empowered naturally eroded America's once-monopolistic strength; the United States has brought humanity to a new era where many are powerful and many can potentially lead. As a result of US efforts to minimize the risk of international relations failures that could one day come back to haunt the United States, the world saw large-scale decline in global war and violence.²

The world today—the world the United States helped create³—with its rising state powers, strategically significant non-state actors, intrinsically intertwined economies, and relative era of peace shows that the United States' postwar goals were met. All of that is now under threat. In a way, this moment of global uncertainty, where many countries are unsettled by questions regarding America's stance on the world stage,⁴ is a testament to the geopolitical clout afforded to the United States as “a force for good in the world,” despite “all [its] warts.”⁵

Yet, the United States' post-World War II sin is that Washington failed to account for America's role in the world after what Fareed Zakaria called

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- 1 Ali Wyne, “Wanted: A Changed US Mindset,” *New Atlanticist*, March 9, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/wanted-a-changed-us-mindset>.
- 2 Joshua S. Goldstein and Steven Pinker, “The Decline of War and Violence,” *Boston Globe*, April 15, 2016.
- 3 Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York, NY: Knopf, February 2012).
- 4 Pew Research Center, “Section 1: America's Global Role,” December 3, 2013, <http://www.people-press.org/2013/12/03/section-1-americas-global-role/>.
- 5 Remarks by President Barack Obama in Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

“the rise of the rest,” namely the relative rise of other countries and actors, which thereby erodes America’s overall power in the world.⁶ To remedy this, the United States must change its approach to global affairs and purposefully bid farewell to its “superpower” status. Instead, Trump’s team should adopt a “superpartner” strategy in which the United States’ ultimate aim is to be the world player other states call upon to coalesce a constellation of actors, as opposed to the perceived oppressive power stunting the growth and potential of others in the global arena.

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In essence, the United States must seek to be central to global efforts, but not necessarily to lead them. Here is the difference: by maintaining its status as a central player, the United States always has an important part to play in solving global problems. By leading, the United States dictates the actions of other players in a given scenario. Now, America has to share the spotlight with other players—state and non-state alike—to achieve its foreign policy objectives and maintain harmony with others. Choosing this course, as opposed to the current “indispensable nation” model, would allow the United States to be more effective and efficient in its dealings around the world while also building up the capacity of other actors to take care of problems as they arise. The United States, in essence, would become the world’s catalyst for action: always working, always available, always present.

Projections of the Global Security Environment

Why is assuming the role of a superpartner better than being the superpower? It has a lot to do with the current and future security environment. As

6 Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of the Rest,” *FareedZakaria.com*, May 12, 2008, <http://fareedzakaria.com/2008/05/12/the-rise-of-the-rest/>.

the National Intelligence Council’s December 2012 *Global Trends 2030* described, the United States is heading into a world where individuals and groups are empowered; power is diffused; demographics are changing; and linkages among food, water, and energy are growing stronger such that any change in one affects the production of another.⁷ This complexity is only compounded by the breakdown in US society and the Western world writ-large, as well as the rising chance of major conflict.⁸

Three years after the National Intelligence Council’s report was published, President Barack Obama’s administration made a similar case in its second and final National Security Strategy—it described a world undergoing multiple transitions where: 1) “power among states is more dynamic;” 2) “power is shifting below and beyond the nation-state;” 3) “the increasing interdependence of the global economy and the rapid pace of technological change are linking individuals, groups, and governments in unprecedented ways;” 4) “a struggle for power is underway among and within many states of the Middle East and North Africa;” and 5) “the global energy market has changed dramatically.”⁹

Based on these trends, a number of conclusions about the future security environment can be drawn:

1. **Non-state actors will be important global players.** The United States should expect that the diffusion of power will strengthen non-state actors, particularly influential groups and individuals, as the Islamic State has shown in recent years.¹⁰ While this does not give these actor sets the same relative power as states on the global stage, it does increase their ability to pose a challenge to the world order. Due to their ability to effect macro- and micro-level change, non-state actors will have an important role to play in both causing and quelling global security threats.¹¹

7 National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, December 2012, <https://globaltrends2030.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/global-trends-2030-november2012.pdf>.

8 Mathew J. Burrows, *Global Risks 2035: The Search for a New Normal*, *Atlantic Council*, September 2016, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Global_Risks_2035_web_0922.pdf.

9 White House, “National Security Strategy,” February 1, 2015, https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf.

10 Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations, and Business* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 6.

11 Barry Pavel and Peter Engelke with Alex Ward, *Dynamic Stability*:



President Barack Obama meets with President-elect Donald Trump at the White House, Nov. 10, 2016.
Photo credit: Jesusemen Oni/VOA.

2. **Empowered people will demand more from their state.** The world will certainly be more tumultuous, but that will not stop empowered individuals—many of them just joining the global middle class¹²—from demanding more of their respective governments. However, many governments around the world are set up to address past problems, not those of today (let alone tomorrow). Fixing government at the state level will be just as important as managing and maintaining world order.¹³ Citizens of the United States, but especially those of developing countries, will further be “at the center of the public-sector universe” and become “prosumers”—empowered and consistent consumers of goods

and resources—of both government benefits and global technologies.¹⁴ This means that if the state does not meet the high demands of a heterogeneous global middle class, governments will be seen as less crucial to the lives of their people. This would be a recipe for instability as citizens lose confidence in their government and therefore work against it, which can prove problematic when moments of global crisis arise.

3. **The rate of global change will only increase.** Technology changes society in myriad ways, but it has never done so at the current rate. “In one generation,” for example, most of humanity will “have gone from having virtually no access to unfiltered information to accessing all of the world’s information through a device that fits in the palm of the hand.”¹⁵ Now, that device is available to more people in more places than ever before. No

US Strategy for a World in Transition, Atlantic Council, April 2015.

12 Homi Kharas and Geoffrey Gertz, “The New Global Middle Class: A Cross-Over from West to East,” The Brookings Institution, March 2010.

13 John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Fourth Revolution: The Global Race to Reinvent the State* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2014), 5.

14 Ibid, 210-1.

15 Schmidt and Cohen, *The New Digital Age*, 4.

aspect of humanity, especially warfare, is immune from the effects of technological progress. Indeed, troops have the ability to conduct operations in a much shorter period of time than was possible only years ago. For example, in the early 2000s, it took nineteen minutes from the time an airman called in a Predator drone strike to its execution. Just a decade earlier, during Operation Desert Storm, that same action took three days.¹⁶ As new technologies become available and governments and people become more empowered, the global landscape and battlefield will continue to shift.

4. **A problem somewhere can become a bigger problem everywhere.** This projection is not new in a globalized world, but it is still important when considering strategy for the coming environment. Whether it is the spread of disease in remote areas; food, water, or energy shortages; the unchecked distribution of illicit drugs; or the dealings of an organized criminal network, these seemingly contained, area-specific problems have the potential to combine to form bigger global dilemmas. Earlier in NATO's Afghanistan campaign, Afghanistan's ability to grow and export opium "kill[ed] five times more citizens of NATO countries than the number of NATO troops killed in Afghanistan itself."¹⁷ Further, the total revenue of organized crime now accounts for between 15 and 20 percent of the world's gross domestic product (GDP), according to journalist Misha Glenny.¹⁸ Thus, more discrete developments around the world will continue to affect the entire global community.
5. **Power will be harder to wield effectively, even by the United States and other strong global actors.** There is no reason to doubt that the United States will remain the world's strongest state in many important categories: military might, economics, demographics, culture, societal vitality, and centrality in global institutions.¹⁹ Even so, power will be "harder to use" and "easier to lose" in this new environment.²⁰ The world's most powerful

governmental and institutional entities will see a relative decline in their ability to achieve desired results around the world on their own.²¹

What does this mean for the United States' role in the world? It means that the superpower model that the United States has abided by since the end of World War II is outdated. America once assumed, for the most part, that it could control outcomes and solve problems in dire situations. As the world changes dramatically, the country is starting to realize that it no longer has the ability to dictate circumstances. It must now act as a central player, working in conjunction with its allies and partners, rather than as a top-down leader of the world. Global problems require global solutions, and the United States alone cannot cure the world's ills. Most importantly, it cannot solve many of the world's problems the way it used to.

Implications for Strategy

If these trends prove true, then what do they imply for future American strategy? First, the United States will have more trouble employing unilateral action. State and non-state actors will have the ability to repel US power in some form, precluding the United States from achieving its goals on its own. In most cases, working in a constellation, regardless of form, will allow the United States to more effectively meet its ends while sharing the burden.²² Similarly, the second assumption makes it clear that the constellations in which the United States would work will, in key cases, involve non-state actors. Therefore, it is safe to say that the era of unilateralism is over. It will always take more actors than America to solve any problem in the world. America's constellation-building power will be just as vital as other aspects of its statecraft.

Second, the United States and all other actors must accommodate the will of a growing and diverse middle class. Ensuring global stability will not be enough. Global stability begins with stable states. As individuals in the developing world increasingly desire the same rights and materials as most of the developed world, these governments will have to provide for their rising expectations or face serious civic unrest. Occupy Wall Street, riots against the police in the United States, the

16 Fred Kaplan, *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2008), 35-6.

17 Parag Khana, *How to Run the World: Charting a Course to the Next Renaissance* (New York, NY: Random House, 2011), 108.

18 Misha Glenny, *McMafia: A Journey through the Global Criminal Underworld* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2009), xix.

19 Joseph Nye, Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs Books, 2011), 187-204.

20 Moisés Naím, *The End of Power: From Boardroom to Battlefields*

and Churches to States, *Why Being in Charge Isn't What It Used to Be* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2013), 2.

21 Robert Manning, "Envisioning 2030: US Strategy in a Post-Western World," Atlantic Council, December 2012.

22 Anne-Marie Slaughter, *A New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

“[T]he United States should look to be the world’s most central actor.”

rise of Donald Trump, the Arab Spring across portions of the Middle East, and anti-government protests from Venezuela to Hong Kong are recent manifestations of an exponentially increasing number of protests sparked by a state’s inability to meet the needs of its people.²³ US strategy should find a way to define the United States’ role in the world for both global and domestic audiences, but also leave space to explain that its global commitments will force it to change course depending on the global situation and the values it needs to defend.²⁴

Third, the United States must expand its notion of national security. What once solely encompassed lethal threats from competing state and non-state actors now includes much more. As biotechnology improves, more and more devices are connected to the internet, and connectivity brings more and more people together online, which increases the risk that Americans’ daily lives could be disrupted by an attack in cyberspace.²⁵ In essence, technological improvements provide many benefits but, without care, provide more vulnerabilities in our way of life.

Further, the United States faces struggles with its education system,²⁶ the obesity of its youth,²⁷ and its crumbling infrastructure,²⁸ among other problems that affect US national security affairs. In a much more competitive world, the United States’ ability to stay ahead of the game in critical areas needs increased focus and investment. Otherwise, adversaries will gain

advantages that eventually become too expensive to overcome. In other words, America’s strategic and security advantages do not just lie in the traditional realms of security. The United States must stay ahead of trends in technology and improve the domestic sources of its power for international advantage.

Finally, the United States should continue to invest in a global system that seeks to empower as many state and non-state actors as possible, thereby giving others a greater stake in the system. Since World War II, the United States has worked to build and maintain an international order, which is designed to provide the most good for the greatest number of people. The system has undoubtedly worked; the global shift toward the diffusion of power and individual empowerment can all be directly tied to America’s post-World War II decisions. The United States should continue to underwrite that order while also looking for situations to empower other actors when possible with the aim to increase the number of states that accept and agree to a rules-based international system. The more other global players take part in the system and crisis management, the better.

Why “Superpartner” over “Superpower”?

If we hold these projections and implications to be true, it becomes increasingly apparent that the way the United States wields power in today’s world will not allow it to control its own destiny or maintain world order. The main reason is that the United States insists on being the world’s superpower, an outdated way of foreign policy making that made sense in the aftermath of World War II but not today. Indeed, achieving the status of the top global player was viewed for centuries as the way to ensure a state’s security. Now, that is no longer the case. In fact, acting as the undisputed hegemon incurs a lot of cost and makes that state the main target of many threats.²⁹ This superpower mindset, should it continue, will clash against the worldviews of other actors and cause more problems than it solves.

Instead, the United States should look to be the world’s most *central* actor. It should position itself in the global order such that, when a situation arises, state and non-state entities look to the United States to help create a constellation of actors to deal with the problem. Depending

23 J. Dana Stuster, “Mapped: Every Protest on Earth since 1979,” *Foreign Policy*, August 22, 2013, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/08/22/mapped_what_every_protest_in_the_last_34_years_looks_like.

24 Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Fourth Revolution*, 209-11.

25 Jason Healey, “Beyond Data Breaches: Global Interconnections of Cyber Risk,” Atlantic Council, April 16, 2014.

26 Joel Klein and Condoleezza Rice, “U.S. Education Reform and National Security,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 2012.

27 Roxanna Hegeman, “Report: Nearly 1 in 3 Young Adults Too Fat for Military,” *Associated Press*, July 15, 2015, <http://www.military-times.com/story/military/2015/07/15/report-nearly-1-in-3-young-adults-too-fat-for-military/30178023/>.

28 Philip K. Howard, “How to Fix America’s Infrastructure,” *The Atlantic*, December 28, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/how-to-fix-a-pothole-with-bipartisan-approval/421575/>.

29 Daniel W. Drezner, “Military Primacy Doesn’t Pay (Nearly as Much as You Think),” *International Security*, July 10, 2013, 52-79.



CDC employee Craig Manning and EIS officer Rebecca Merrill examine pre-deployment maps as part of the Ebola response. *Photo credit: CDC Global/Flickr.*

on how vital the situation is to US interests, Washington can choose to either be a more involved player or “lead from behind”³⁰ (a term that was used poorly to define an ill-conceived mission, but which remains a leadership style that in theory could prove useful when correctly applied). To be clear, the United States should have the ability to engage as much or as little as it wants—just like a catalyst—doing whatever is required to complete the job and secure US strategic interests.

Thus, the United States should not be satisfied with being the world’s leader, rather it should strive to be the world’s leading partner. It should aim to be the only state actor capable enough to plug in and plug out of many global frameworks, and it should work to be the unanimous choice of other actors who seek a partnership to solve global problems. Being the superpartner, then, requires a deft mix of “hard” power (having tangible resources for adaptability and agility)

and “soft” power (attractiveness to other actors). This framework will allow the United States to be a major player for years to come while simultaneously encoding burden-sharing into its strategy.

Strategic Objectives

If the United States adopts the superpartner framework, how should the new approach be implemented, and with what objectives in mind? The implications for American foreign national security strategy make a few things very clear. Most importantly, the United States will be faced with many challenges that could threaten the US homeland, US allies and partners, and the world order. Ensuring these threats do not overwhelm US power, legitimacy, and centrality in global affairs will require attracting state and non-state actors to work in conjunction with the United States in certain global governance arrangements, where actors revolve around the United States’ leadership. These partners should share the same vision as America in the attempt to maintain stability during a tumultuous period.

30 Ryan Lizza, “Leading from Behind,” *New Yorker*, April 26, 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/leading-from-behind>.

There are three strategic objectives that the United States should seek to achieve in the coming global environment. While more objectives could be articulated, the following are both achievable in the near-to-medium term and the most important for the United States to pursue.

1. **Maintain American Centrality.** US power will continue to decline relative to other actors as the world approaches the year 2035. This means that the United States should choose to be a *central* global power, but not necessarily the world's "number one" state. In essence, it should purposefully eschew top-down global leadership for a role as the world's most important and critical player in constellation management and global stability. To ensure other actors want to work alongside the United States instead of against it, it should engage with all actor sets, in varying degrees of situation-contingent intensity, to solidify its central position. The ultimate aim is to be the actor other states call upon to coalesce a constellation, as opposed to the perceived oppressive power stunting the growth and potential of other global players.
2. **Promote Constellation Frameworks.** As other actors gain power, they will look to pursue their interests more forcefully. This increased competition may lead to a more unstable global environment. The United States must work to harness these impulses and show that more can be done together than alone. Further, these constellations—with the United States acting as the catalyst for action—will be constructed to solve problems around the world as they arise. This allows for more effective crisis management and a smaller burden on the United States. Encouraging others to share in maintenance of the global order, especially during a tumultuous time, is of vital strategic importance for the United States because America can no longer do it alone.
3. **Mitigate Global Risk.** The global order is unraveling, according to leading strategic foresight analyst Mat Burrows.³¹ In this environment, the chance for strategic shocks to the United States and other actors rises. While some ills borne from the future environment will not be existential to the United States, "wicked problems" will arise that threaten individuals all over the world.³² The best the United

States and its fellow global actors can do is work together to shape the global environment in such a way as to deter and defend against these risks. When risks materialize into true security challenges, the United States should work with others to achieve the desired end-state.

These three goals show that the United States' future strategy should not be guided by either restraint, containment, or unquestioned primacy approaches. Instead, the United States must seek to be a global actor of paramount importance—a central actor—above everything else. Again, this does not mean that the United States is either continuously engaged or disengaged, but rather it consistently works to calibrate its involvement based upon the interests at stake. Each time an issue that threatens the international order arises, the United States must play a role in order to help maintain some semblance of the world America created.

Conclusion

For the United States to succeed in the future, it needs to adopt a new strategic approach: the superpartner. Past strategic frameworks, like containment, were essential in their time but are no longer suitable for dealing with a world where power is decentralized and the opportunity for crisis exists every day. For this reason alone, the United States must update its current National Security Strategy to reflect the changing nature of the global environment—it must use different means to achieve new ends.

Leon Panetta, the former congressman, CIA director, and secretary of defense, said that "an aversion to complexity and an abundance of politics" will make it hard to define a new strategy for the twenty-first century.³³ He is right, but it is now up to this and future administrations to move beyond the status quo and confront this ever-complicated world. The hope is that the superpartner concept helps in this endeavor.

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31 Burrows, *Global Risks 2035*.

32 Horst W.J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General

Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973), 155.

33 Leon Panetta with Jim Newton, *Worthy Fights* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2014), 373.

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