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## **The Long-Term Foreign Policy Consequences of 9/11: An American Neo-Isolationism?**

*Foreign Affairs*, the premier publication of the American foreign policy establishment, asked a blunt question in its 2011 fall issue: "Is America Over?" Ten years after 9/11, after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, both justified under a broadly defined concept of a war on terror, a sobering stock taking has set in as the foreign policy elite debates future policy options, and public opinion signals a shift toward an inward orientation. The extensive and intrusive international interventions under both Republican and Democratic administrations has yielded only limited results in terms of creating stability and transforming failed and problematic states in the greater Middle East. The reach and effectiveness of American foreign policy is being called into question, leading to concerns whether the United States can maintain its status as a superpower with a global reach, a position that has been taken as a given ever since the end of the Second World War. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the manner in which they have been conducted, in an uncoordinated tandem, have been far from bolstering the position and reputation of the U.S. and may have undermined the status of the U.S. as a global power in the long run. This effect may be more important than the problematic legacy of the war on terror such as the failure to close Guantanamo and non-criminal detention (Wittes 1-12; 111-38). The realist theorist Stephen M. Walt has spoken about "the end of the American era" (7).

This reassessment of American power is compounded by a severe economic slowdown and a long-term budget crisis following the financial meltdown of 2008 and by the rise of competitors outside the transatlantic arena, above all China in Asia. And the international assessment of America's economic position in the world would probably be even more dismal, if Europe were not going through an existential crisis of its own. The economic basis of America's engagement with the world is crumbling. The American public has reacted to the failure to reach the goals of the war on terror, above all the incomplete missions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the enormous expense of resources, with a turn inward. Polls show that neither of the wars has broad support among the American public anymore and there is a strong preference for restricted future engagement, if not withdrawal from major arenas of world conflict. This paper explores the possibility that the long-term consequences of 9/11 might well be a diminished status of the U.S. as a world power, driven by an intensified public discourse to adjust America's foreign policy posture to its reduced resource and

motivational basis (Greider 117-72), a process whose end result may well be called a neo-isolationism. As we are entering the post-9/11-war period, a sober assessment of American foreign policy options suggests that 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror might just have created the conditions for an American neo-isolationism. This paper explores how likely such an outcome could be.

### ***The 9/11 Wars: Costly and Inconclusive***

Following 9/11, the U.S. pursued an expansive and interventionist foreign policy, settling on extensive military action to fight terrorism, now commonly known as "9/11 wars" (Burke). Both administrations, the Bush as well as the Obama administration, subscribed to a war on terror, although initial motivations and intentions were clearly different. Both administrations, at various decision points, struggled to define clearly the objectives to be pursued, vacillating between counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency, nation-building and democratization. The Obama administration tried to differentiate between the right war (Afghanistan) and the wrong war (Iraq) (Woodward 75) and eventually succeeded in winding down the war in Iraq, a goal to which the Bush administration had taken a first step with the *Status of Forces Agreement* of 2008 that envisaged the withdrawal of American military forces by the end of 2011 (Bruno). The removal of Saddam Hussein and political freedoms for Shias and Kurds could be counted as the obvious gains, but internal and external stability hardly looks assured. On a strategic level, Shiite Iran is the strategic winner. It is an intriguing thought whether the Arab spring that resulted in the toppling of autocratic dictatorships by popular rebellion might have yielded the same result at much lesser human and material costs (Bacevich et al.). With American troop presence ending in 2011, seasoned observers see Iraq on the brink of another civil war (Pollak 59).

While in Afghanistan a case could have been made for toppling the Taliban regime and denying Al Qaeda a safe haven, goals that had strong support in the entire spectrum of American foreign policy positions and the international community, an initial anti-terrorist operation morphed into inadequate nation-building, resulting from the massive competition for resources induced by the Iraq War. As in the case of the Iraq War, knowledge of local culture, history and identities was inadequate or wholly absent in a fractured tribal and corrupt society. In addition, the U.S. never had sufficient control over insurgents, terrorist organizations and government actions in neighboring Pakistan (Jones 279-95; 313-29). The U.S. never managed latent interaction between the two war theaters and frequently enabled the kind of terrorism it was fighting (Riedel). Although the U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan is termed to end in 2014 and peace negotiations are on the way, it remains unclear whether the

Karzai regime can survive and whether instability in a region with two nuclear armed powers, locked in a strategic stand-off, can be prevented. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, it should be noted, the U.S. came close to outright losing the wars (Bergen 174-96; Burke 124-49). And if victory is defined in terms of achievement of enhanced security for the U.S. and the regional theaters, then both wars could well be counted as defeats of sorts (Walt 11).

While the Bush administration is certainly more to blame for the conduct and final outcome of the two wars, a number of features of post-9/11 American foreign policy stand out that also reflect on the Obama administration. The definition of threats remained vague and shifting. Threats were exaggerated and blown-up. And when ill-defined targets were not reached, threats as well as objectives were redefined. Obama shifted from "a war that we must win" during the election campaign in 2008 to the ambivalent search for an exit strategy when he became President, which vacillated between increasing the troop level well beyond 100,000 and setting a withdrawal deadline starting in 2011, with completion by 2014 (Woodward 335-45, Bergen 333-34). In interpreting anti-terrorism as war, operational precision was lost. As one of the most distinguished figures of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, the President emeritus of the *Council of Foreign Relations* Leslie Gelb commented:

The 'war on terror' has proved to be perhaps the most wasteful, unnecessary, self-destructive, and frighteningly costly of all America's foreign-policy mistakes. But it is not an aberration. It shows the pattern: impatience, incoherent debate, intolerance of others' views, exaggeration of enemy threats and strengths, and inevitable pressures "to do more" to preserve American credibility and to "win" in order to cover up mistakes. (Gelb 21)

A related tendency is the belief that the United States possesses the soft and the hard power to solve other nations' problems through nation-building in its own image. If other rationales of national interest fail, the promotion of democracy remains the final rationale superseding previous goals, which was particularly true for the neo-conservatives in the Bush administration. As Gelb puts it: "Bush married American fears of terrorism to an American missionary dream of democracy creationism" (21). Such strategy sets open-ended goals of societal transformations without ever defining the scope of resources and means and raises expectations about the evolutionary potential of societies that are easily disappointed. Obama prudently refrained from such goals, without totally discarding them.

The other striking tendency associated with the two wars is a negligence of economic and human costs. Since 2001, the two 9/11 wars cost on average between 150 and 200 billion dollars per year, excluding the human cost and suffering, particularly among local populations. The striking feature was that society was not burdened with a bill such as war bonds as during the two world

wars. To the contrary, the Bush administration engineered massive tax cuts as the war efforts were stepped up (Falke, "Another Failed Presidency" 302). This fuelled the perception that the U.S. could afford anything without ever having to account for the costs, an assumption that was fully discredited with the onset of the financial crisis. Altogether, the total long-term cost of the Iraq War is estimated to amount to as much as three trillion dollars (Bilmes/Stieglitz), an expenditure hardly justified by a very uncertain and unstable outcome which in the end may only benefit Iran, America's major adversary in the region. The same argument can be made for the Afghan war, where after the Obama troop surge the U.S. is spending 100 billion dollars annually on a country with a GDP of roughly 14 billion dollars, while the aggregate aid it receives is a fraction of that amount (Kupchan; Green). As the two 9/11 wars are winding down, with Al-Qaeda weakened, but not defeated, and a shift to an anti-terror strategy mostly through unmanned drone strikes, the results of America's "longest war" (Bergen 335-51) are meager and sobering given the effort and expense. Nation-building in the two war-torn countries is incomplete and their trajectories, albeit for different reasons, uncertain. Particularly in Afghanistan, the U.S. has been unable to establish viable government structures to stamp out corruption and contain militant insurgency (Parent and McDonald 43).

Disillusionment has set in, prompting disenchantment in the American population and a strategic discussion in the U.S. foreign policy elite. The simple assumption that the sole lone superpower can take on any foreign policy problem or a direct threat with a broadly defined response and open-ended goals is severely shaken. Not only narrow cost-benefit analysis is called for, a concept that is difficult to apply in the field of national security, but clearer matching of means and ends. The decisive context of the changing attitudes of the American population and the strategic debate among elites is the weakening of the economic and fiscal position of the United States. The extended military engagements have certainly contributed to the fiscal problems, but the true cause of the economic malaise is the financial crisis of 2008/2009 and its long-term consequences for U.S. growth. This will limit U.S. foreign policy options, and it may force a focus on rebuilding domestic strength which must be interpreted as a turn inward, whether it can be termed a precondition to maintain America's global role or not. This theme resonates in President Obama's call "to focus on nation-building here at home" (CNN).

### ***A Weakened Economic Basis***

Following the financial crisis 2008 the U.S. at home is faced with a prolonged economic crisis, now known as the great recession. Median family income stagnated until the crisis and then fell by six percent. In addition, households are

burdened by asset losses, be it in their home equity or their other asset portfolios. The housing and building sector, the main driver of U.S. economic growth in the last decade, is in dire straits and downsizing. The U.S. faces prolonged economic stagnation, a "No-Growth Trap" and in retrospect economic commentators see the period of the 9/11 wars as "America's lost decade" (Friedman 36-38; Zuckerman). Domestic concerns over economic well-being overshadow any foreign policy debate about the future strategy of the U.S., fuelling and reflecting isolationist sentiments.

The focal point of economic crisis is the precarious fiscal position of the U.S., i.e. its dramatic budget imbalance and the growth of federal debt. The fiscal year 2011 ended with a deficit of \$1.3 trillion, approximately 8.5 percent of GDP. Expenditures made up 24 percent of GDP, while revenues were merely 15 percent. More worrying are the long-term projections. The bi-partisan *National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform*, appointed by President Obama in 2010, warned that by 2025, following current expenditure and tax patterns, federal revenues would only cover federal health programs, Social Security and debt service. All other activities from education, science, energy, transportation, infrastructure and defense would have to be financed by incurring debt. Federal debt would be greater than national income and would reach 185 percent of GDP by 2035 (National Commission 21-23).

Fiscal policy is unsustainable and budget consolidation, at least in the medium-term, is inevitable, an imperative which has led to a highly contentious, polarized and deadlocked process, showing the dysfunctional nature of the current workings of the U.S. political system. The root cause of the stalemate is the refusal of the Republican majority in the House of Representatives to consider any compromise involving higher revenues, relying solely on cutting expenditures (Falke, "Ernüchterung" 22). With the *Budget Control Act* of August 2011, budgetary stalemate and paralysis have set in motion an at-random process of budget cutting, and as 81 percent of federal expenditures exempting debt service consists of entitlement programs (mostly health and retirement programs) and defense programs, cutting defense and national security spending is on the agenda. Half of the automatic budget cuts that are mandated by the *Budget Control Act* after the bipartisan *Congressional Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction* failed in its deliberations have to come from the defense budget, unless this law is revised and a new agreement is reached (Congressional Budget Office).

The Obama administration has tried to preempt an at-random process. It has already made its own proposals for defense cuts of 485 billion dollars over ten years, not only in order to prevent a disorderly, uncoordinated process and to immunize itself against the claim that it would not protect national security programs. These cuts are largely cosmetic. The U.S. will maintain all ten aircraft carriers and all major weapons systems. In nominal terms the budget will

actually increase for another five years. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dempsey, commented drily: "We are retaining our full spectrum capability" (Dyer and Lemer). However, when the real budget cutting starts and no new sources of revenue can be agreed on, the defense budget will come under serious pressure.

Whatever the outcome of budget struggles and the size of the contribution of the defense budget to budgetary consolidation, the resource base for U.S. power projection of any kind will be smaller, if not severely undermined. The security policy establishment in the U.S., which includes a significant number of Republicans, will resist cuts, pointing to challenges such as Iran and North Korea and the rise of China as the main competitor. Cuts in weapons systems may also endanger the local job base in congressional districts, considering that the defense sector is one of the few U.S. manufacturing industries protected from globalization. This aspect of the defense budget of maintaining a crucial part of the U.S. manufacturing base has been recognized recently by the Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta: "The budget recognizes that a critical part of our ability to mobilize is a healthy industrial base. Maintaining the vitality of the industrial base and avoiding imposing unacceptable costs or risks on our critical suppliers will guide many of the decisions that we have made" (Dyer and Lemer). But some members of the security establishment are coming to the realization that surging national debt and an unsustainable fiscal position have a negative impact on national security. The former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mike Mullen, called the alarming growth of national debt "our biggest security threat," arguing that the uncontrolled deficits would lead to economic instability and undermine America's global role (Mullen). Adjustment of the defense budget appears inevitable, but even if it proceeds in a rational and calculated fashion, which is questionable, it will lead to a "less assertive foreign policy" (O'Hanlon 2). Foreign and security policy goals will be formulated under clear budgetary and resource constraints. The U.S. can at most be a "frugal superpower" (Mandelbaum 1-10). The combined effects of the overreach of the two 9/11 wars and the fallout of the financial crisis account for this state of affairs.

### ***Retrenchment and the Future of American Power***

In official declarations such as the Obama administration's *National Security Strategy of 2010*, claims to global leadership are being maintained (Slaughter; White House). These claims are usually bolstered by a call for national renewal, meaning a revamping of economic and social conditions (for instance improvement of physical and human infrastructure and resources, particularly in the fields of energy, transportation, and education). But this is a long-term

project with uncertain outcomes, which cannot answer the question how global leadership can be pursued under economic and budgetary constraints. A downsizing of global reach and strategic ambitions is inevitable. This need is actually reflected in the post-9/11-wars debate on the future of U.S. strategy. As a direct consequence of constraints, the U.S. will be less disposed to intervene indiscriminately. Wars of choice will be a thing of the past, and the scope of strategic reach will be much more limited. For the first time since America's rise to superpower status, the U.S. will be forced to make deliberate and carefully calibrated choices. On the positive side, it has the unintended but welcome side-effect of a U.S. less prone to commit serious mistakes. A restrictive budgetary environment sets a threshold for interventionist projects whose rationale is weak or concocted and in which the means do not match ends. In a way, the constraints work as insurance against imperial overstretch (Parent and McDonald 38). Nevertheless, these constraints only set a negative bar. It still requires that national security interests as well as threats have to be defined much more clearly. Diffuse and expansive goals that imply irredeemable security commitments and massive expenditures of resources cannot be part of such a strategy. Downsizing of strategic aims as well as their clear delineation are on the agenda.

Given these limits, it is highly doubtful that the U.S. will be able to maintain an ambitious, overarching international role and retain the ability to shape events as it has in the past. Stephen M. Walt recently pointed out how restricted the resource position of the U.S. has become in the second decade of the new millennium: At the beginning of the Cold War, the U.S. could afford the Marshall Plan to prop up Europe's ailing economies at a cost of 13 billion dollars, at the time five percent of U.S. GDP. Today's equivalent of that effort would amount to 700 billion dollars. No amount even near this is available to stabilize the Arab world after the recent upheaval there. Following the Arab spring, the U.S. could only make available one billion dollars in loans and one billion in debt-forgiveness. There is no starker way to highlight the contrast. The U.S. will be unable to buy primacy. These conditions will also circumscribe America's ability to act as an effective broker in the Middle East peace process and engage allies such as Egypt in a constructive role. In times of economic and geo-political preeminence, it could have been expected that the U.S. would launch a major effort to prevent the Eurozone from imploding, particularly as the first linchpin of the crisis, Greece, borders on the crucial strategic region, the eastern Mediterranean, comprising Turkey, Cyprus and Israel. In 1947, it was the economic crisis in Greece and the pressure of a communist takeover that set in motion the European aid package that culminated in the Marshall Plan (Walt 11; Rachman).

The situation would be less virulent if the U.S. were not faced with the rise of a strategic competitor, namely China in Asia. China is slated to surpass the U.S.

as the largest economy by 2025 and unlike the Soviet Union, the past competitor, it is developing a much more sophisticated economy and technologically competitive sectors that benefit from integration in global value chains. Taking advantage of its stronger economic and technological basis, China is investing heavily in its military, particularly in maritime power projection in Asia (Friedberg, 1-15; Ikenberry 342-48; Jaques). While it is not foreordained that the U.S. will enter into intense security competition with China in Asia, China is bound to challenge U.S. primacy in Asia. So far, the nature and scope of the Chinese challenge remain vague.

Despite an unstable Middle East, an unsettled situation in the "AfPak" theater, failed states that harbor terrorists (Somalia, Yemen) and the challenges from hostile states (Iran and North Korea), the strategic context is currently benign. The U.S. does not face a major threat of a Cold War nature. Even if the U.S. has disagreements with major powers, there is no structural hostility similar to what was known during the Cold War. As Richard Haass, the President of the Council on Foreign Relations has pointed out, "U.S. relations with the principal powers of this era are for the most part good or at least good enough" (Haass). So the strategic context favors the emergence of a debate about the merits of retrenchment (Parent and McDonald). Support for retrenchment has become mainstream and unites liberals as well as more conservative realist thinkers and theorists (Walt; Jentleson). This emerging consensus holds that the U.S. must limit resources and commitments to core interests and narrowly focus on the "most valuable geographic and functional areas" (Parent and McDonald 40). It advocates a smaller global military footprint and specific reduction in forward military deployment in Asia (with the exception of troop increases in Australia) and the demobilization of active-duty military in Europe, which after 9/11 mainly served as a platform for U.S. troop deployment in Afghanistan and Iraq, wars which are in the process of winding down. Under a retrenchment approach, the U.S. will go for reduced and focused military commitments and much smaller U.S. military forces, which above all will be characterized by a different composition. Such an approach would imply a massive cut in weapons systems that were predicated on an encompassing global role (Parent and McDonald 45). Michael O'Hanlon, the Brookings-based defense analyst, has argued that a ten-percent cut of the defense budget would be compatible with refocused and narrowly calibrated strategic commitments (O'Hanlon 2011, 10). The Obama administration, in a long awaited strategic review by the Pentagon, has responded to this situation by shifting the strategic focus to countering China in the Asia-Pacific region, and drawing down troops from Europe. What is openly implied in this reorientation is a shift from the Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific community. In theory, the Obama administration is thus responding to what it perceives to be a future significant threat, although the wisdom of openly singling out China may well be questioned (Brezinski). The pivotal shift to Asia

with the barely veiled objective of containing China's rise, if not conducted prudently, may also lead to an enhanced security competition which would run counter to retrenchment and lead to overambitious strategic claims that will be hard to redeem. This is a reminder that there are retrenchment strategies that are not compatible with the shrinking economic base and endanger rebuilding domestic strength. As indicated above, the Obama administration has proposed moderate cuts to the defense budget. These cuts however, fall short by more than half of the automatic spending cuts mandated by the budget agreement of summer 2011 and can be seen as a move to prevent deeper cuts (Masters). Such a strategy may be termed provisional retrenchment.

The most stringent version of retrenchment is the strategy of offshore balancing, where all forward deployment in Europe, Asia and the Middle East is withdrawn and home-based rapid-response forces with strong reserves become the domestically located bedrock of American power projection. In this case, the U.S. would have a drastically reduced external military footprint, and would rely on allies or proxies to counter threats in any region of interest. This is being advocated by realists such as Walt (14) and resonates with advocates of radical retrenchment such as Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul (Parent and McDonald 43). An active pursuit of off-shore balancing would border on isolationism, and poses the question where the line between retrenchment and isolationism begins. Regardless of a deliberate pursuit of off-shore balancing, an isolationist course would be much more likely if budget cuts go significantly beyond the benchmark of ten percent within the next ten years.

Another dimension that may predicate retrenchment ending up in isolationism is the focus on rebuilding domestic strength, advocated as a crucial component of a retrenchment strategy. The idea here is that the strategic restraint will free resources for renewing the American economy, domestic investment, and improvements in areas such as education, infrastructure and energy. While the need for such improvements is not disputed, the zero-sum nature of such a process is underestimated or simply ignored. If resources are shifted from national security to domestic projects and the shift is dramatic and radical, it may undercut the ability for foreign engagement and lead to an exclusive domestic focus, even if this shift is being proposed as a way to rebuild the economic basis for long-term international engagement. For instance, the prospects for a retrenchment dividend as expected by Parent and McDonald (42) as well as by Kupchan (11) and Jentleson are problematic, given America's fiscal woes. The savings may simply have to be used to reduce the deficit, not to increase domestic spending. And if international engagement and strategic commitment are suspended until the basis of American power is restored, the global role to which the U.S. still aspires, may be lost for good. Thus, a concentration on "nation-building at home", done at the expense of foreign engagement, may be an inadvertent stepping-stone for an economically inflicted

neo-isolationism. Whether retrenchment becomes a passport to neo-isolationism depends on the balancing of domestic needs and the preferences for continued international engagement. In the end, this will depend on the choice of sound fiscal policies, which has not been forthcoming as of late.

### ***Public Opinion: Just Drifting to Neo-Isolationism?***

Whether the U.S. in response to the inconclusive 9/11 wars and the economic crisis will succumb to isolationist impulses is not only dependent upon the strategic choices of the foreign policy elite and their strategic formulations. It is also heavily influenced by public opinion and attitudes. A sustained public vote for international disengagement or a political grassroots movement pushing in that direction could move the U.S. over the isolationist brink, particularly if no elite consensus is being formed and no balanced strategy for retrenchment can be articulated. Therefore, it is instructive to look at trends in public opinion. There are clear signs that the public at large is weary of costly foreign engagements. The inconclusive wars and their expense in resources and human life have led to a widespread disillusionment with foreign commitments and interventions. The very restrained response to the Libyan crisis is an indication of a much more cautious posture towards interventions abroad.

As such, the public reaction to misconceived and badly implemented interventions do not constitute isolationism. An operational definition of isolationism would be helpful, as the historical precedent of the 1920s and 1930s merely reflects a different historical context, when the U.S. was an emerging power that was not in a position to shape the global system. A contemporary isolationism or neo-isolationism would imply a step-down from global power status, not a refusal to step up when an opportunity opens up. In contrast to the 1920s and 30s, the United States today (still) carries the traits of the "sole surviving superpower" (Jentleson 38, Junker 67) and has shaped the current global system decisively ever since the 1940s in its security, economic and cultural value dimensions (soft-power). This implies that isolationism in a contemporary sense would need to be defined in reference to this position.

Richard Haass has given a workable contemporary definition of isolationism: "Isolationism is the willful turning away from the world even when a rigorous assessment of U.S. interest argues for acting." This definition of course ties isolationism to a clear articulation of strategic objectives and choices that usually are not referred to in public polling. Nevertheless, public opinion data indicates a clear desire to withdraw from foreign commitment and engagement that can be interpreted as a popular swing towards isolationism. Interventions such as the war in Afghanistan have lost all support. Two-thirds of those polled believe that the war was not worth fighting (Washington Post 2011). And while

this can be interpreted as disenchantment with drawn-out, inconclusive military adventures, the evidence for isolationist sentiment goes far beyond the rejection of problematic military interventions. According to a Pew Center poll, 58 percent of Americans believe that the United States should pay less attention to problems overseas and 65 percent want to drastically reduce foreign military commitments. 72 percent endorse the reduction of foreign aid programs, although they remain at a miniscule amount of 0.2 percent of GDP. While these trends had been well established for Democrats, the interesting development is that Republicans follow suit. In 2002, only 22 percent of Republicans believed that the United States should mind its own business internationally; by 2011, 45 percent of Republicans supported this position. Part of this sentiment is the weakening support for cooperation with Europe. Among Republicans, 57 percent believe that in transatlantic security and diplomatic affairs the United States should take a more independent approach. And barely 51 percent believe that NATO is essential for American security, while the score for Democrats is still an impressive 69 percent (Stokes).

While polls are exhibit A for an isolationist tendency in the post-9/11-war era, exhibit B is the emergence of the Tea Party, a heterogeneous movement of right-wing anti-establishment populism that started out opposing President Obama's domestic agenda, particularly health reform legislation (Gast und Kühne 251-57). The Tea Party has primarily focused on reducing the size of government, radical budget cutting, the nostalgic return to a nineteenth-century understanding of the Constitution and an antiquated relationship between citizen and government. It has largely avoided clear foreign policy statements, but it does have a neo-isolationist wing, represented in the current Republican line-up by Libertarian Congressman and presidential candidate Ron Paul (Kupchan 14). Paul opposes any military engagement of the U.S., including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and advocates the withdrawal of all American troops from foreign soil and a drastically reduced military force that would simply serve to defend the homeland. His ideas, if implemented, would spell an end to the role of the U.S. as world policeman. In addition, he favors the withdrawal of the U.S. from all international organizations, specifically the U.N., and would also end America's alliance commitment. His foreign policy program would be a radical version of Fortress America with the elimination of all offensive or forward-based elements.

The leading candidate for the Republican nomination, Mitt Romney, has responded to neo-isolationist pressures and supports withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, a position shared by unsuccessful Tea Party favorites such as Michele Bachman and Texas Governor Rick Perry ("Mitt Romney's foreign policy"). At the same time, it cannot be ignored that the hard core of the Tea Party strongly endorses a robust response to international terrorism and advocates unconditional support of Israel, including interventionist efforts

against the Iranian nuclear program. This may be in part tactically motivated, but these positions are incompatible with a full shift to isolationism. The exponents of Tea Party foreign policy positions thus are not monolithic; while an isolationist undercurrent remains, two camps seem to be emerging, one that favors outright isolationist stances, and another that supports spot interventions in ideologically charged flash-points, where neo-conservative value and power claims are challenged (Israel, Iran).

What unites these two camps is the open and at times aggressive rejection of liberal internationalism, which is based on the active support of international organizations, the extension of multilateral legal regimes and the pursuit of all bilateral or informal goals of international cooperation. In foreign policy, Tea Party exponents also exhibit anti-elitist and anti-intellectual tendencies, showing a strong distaste for expertise, reasoned discourse, empathy and understanding of foreign cultures and history. Their distaste refers to all institutions that analyze the challenges and problems of America's global role and thus are an indispensable basis for formulating a professional foreign policy. A precise analysis of the interdependence and complexity of the problems facing the U.S., of specific cultural, political and economic factors shaping the relationship to allies and adversaries alike, is seen as dispensable (Mead). The ideological key to the isolationism as articulated by the Tea Party may actually lie in its willful ignorance of the complexities of the international system in the post-9/11-war era and the denial of the position of the U.S. in that system, which is increasingly characterized by domestic weaknesses in the U.S., and a less controllable international environment as demonstrated by the seismic shifts in the Arab world. The neo-isolationists of the Tea Party are totally unaware of the fact that the evolving post-9/11 international system will be much less America-centered. In its assumption of a self-sufficient America, it ignores that the U.S. has to undergo an adjustment process to maintain a premier role. The Tea Party and its isolationist wing are in a state of permanent denial (Jentleson 45). In short, the post-9/11-war strategic policy-making is operating in a context of neo-isolationist popular pressures and movements. What are the consequences for American strategy in the post-9/11-war world?

### *Formulating Strategic Post-9/11-Wars Options Under Isolationist Pressure*

Thinking about a post-9/11-war neo-isolationism, one should keep in mind that the classical isolationism of the 1920s was not absolute. The U.S. did not join the League of Nations and played only a minimal role in sustaining European security arrangements, primarily by sponsoring disarmament initiatives, but it did stay involved in trying to stabilize the European economy, in restructuring German reparation payments (Herring 436-83). A shift toward isolationism

faces formidable institutional and ideational obstacles. Even the Tea Party, although drawn by a strong isolationist undercurrent, focuses on flash-points of American foreign policy such as the Israel-Palestinian conflict and Iran that tie the U.S. firmly to major crisis spots in the international system. Also, internationalist institutions in the U.S. remain strong. The array of elite think tanks that promote America's involvement in the world, be it with a liberal, centrist or neo-conservative slant, the military and weapon producing industries as well as business and financial institutions that are integrated into global markets or push the globalization process, remain bulwarks against isolationism. There is a large foreign policy elite, primarily in the coastal regions, that benefit from America's global role and will resist a drift toward isolationism (Szabo).

Isolationism would also have to compete with other approaches and doctrines or grand strategies. This ability depends not only on a clearer articulation of an isolationist doctrine, but also on the viability of other approaches. How do these approaches hold up? The conception of American theorists of international relations of a new post-hegemonic world order, in which the U.S. continues to be a leader, are not fully convincing. This conception is driven by the idea that the U.S. will be able to renegotiate its leadership claim within a new global order by sharing leadership positions with emerging powers under a multilateral framework (Ikenberry 279-332). But even under Obama, America's willingness to cede sovereignty and to submit to multilateral rule-making has been severely circumscribed and would require substantial economic resources and commitments that may not be forthcoming from the political system.

Admittedly, the approach of intertwining American leadership claims with multilateralism has its attractions: An expansion and strengthening of multilateral regimes could be useful for the purpose of integrating emerging powers such as India and China into new regimes relating to climate change, competition for scarce resources such as energy and raw materials, protecting intellectual property rights and stabilizing failed states through assistance programs, before these powers leave their imprint on the global order. But there is no domestic support for such an approach, given the growing reluctance to cede sovereignty. In a resource-strapped era, multilateralism is only acceptable in a version of burden-sharing, which in practice would rather be burden-shifting. Other approaches such as democracy promotion coupled with nation-building, even without the martial undertones of the Bush administration, are hard to sustain and exhausted anyway. The same is true for the continuation of an extensive and invasive war on terror that would transcend a basic defensive posture (Haass).

What remains then is really retrenchment. This implies that the U.S. takes an adaptive approach to its diminished economic means and reduces its commitments and its role as a world power to those strategic options that can pass a narrow national interest test. The U.S. would without doubt remain a

major power, but with a reduced scope. The problem, however, is that the line between retrenchment and isolationism is not clearly demarcated. The process of retrenchment, once started, could get on slippery footing and easily morph into neo-isolationism should an ever narrower definition of national interest inspire the search for strategic options. The U.S. "must guard against doing too little" (Kupchan 13). This could well be the case if the economic recovery takes longer than expected, or if the approach of "rebuilding national strength" through investment in jobs, energy, education and infrastructure loses any reference to its instrumental character for renewing America's global role, and may just be what it is anyway: a domestic policy program. This could be true if these investments get in direct competition with more traditional national security expenditures and programs in terms of budgetary consolidation. The rebuilding-domestic-strength-approach has zero-sum solution properties and involves serious trade-offs with national security where one side may lose out. And waiting with international commitments or the reactivation of America's global role until the domestic basis has been restored may put off a revival of a global role until it cannot be revived anymore, or at least the resumption of the old status would prove difficult and require a costly catch-up effort. This is the downside of the "rebuild-national-strength"-approach that gives isolationism an inroad, a risk that the advocates of retrenchment conveniently overlook.

That a well-calibrated, measured retrenchment is necessary may well be true. But the risk of a turn to isolationism is enhanced by a crucial contextual factor: the evident dysfunctionality of the political system. The discussion about these issues takes place in an increasingly polarized political system. So far these dysfunctional aspects have been most conspicuous in decision-making relating to domestic issues, above all in the budget process (Falke, "US-amerikanische Haushaltspolitik"). But budgetary decisions involve trade-offs between foreign and domestic policy commitment, and it is only a matter of time until the dysfunctionality spills over into the foreign policy arena (Indyk et al.). A political system that is increasingly unable to come to decisions on routine issues such as raising the debt ceiling will most likely produce stalemate and paralysis across the board and will inevitably diminish America's capacity to make the informed strategic choices that a retrenchment strategy requires. A instable political system and the resulting lack of consensus directly undermines America's ability to play a global role. The "real" renewal of national strength that would be most relevant for undergirding America's global role may well be a more consensual political system that can sort out the strategic options and match them with necessary means without permanently succumbing to populist pressures, detours and distortions. Political dysfunctionality may well be the seedbed for isolationism. This danger is obvious as isolationist sentiment is rooted at both ends of the political spectrum, with Republicans in the guise of the Tea Party only being the latest manifestation. In a situation of stalemate over

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budgetary trade-offs between domestic and international spending, the isolationist outer wings of both camps may well define the default option.

So to give an answer to the question in the title: Neo-isolationism is not immediately imminent. The emerging paradigm governing the post-9/11-wars period will be retrenchment. America's strategic overreach and military overextension in its response to 9/11 terrorism has made it impossible "to purchase hegemony cheaply" as in the past (Parent and McDonald 35). The American public is largely disillusioned with costly and drawn-out interventions, and foreign policy elites doubt the capability to decisively shape every regional conflict in its favor, given a shrinking resource basis. The 9/11 wars then have not redeemed the Bush administration's hegemonic project of a restructured, democratic Middle East, nor of a world where terrorism is a marginal phenomenon. The overextended war efforts have also not produced the stability in critical regions such as Iraq and Afghanistan/Pakistan that pragmatists and realists in the foreign policy establishment hoped for. What began as a hegemonic project has ended in a tactical and strategic retreat and a need for calculated and deliberate retrenchment. It is hard to ignore, though, that the fallout of the Bush foreign policy overreach also includes a strong isolationist reflex on the popular level. This reflex will be virulent in all coming policy debates, including in the central narrative of retrenchment. If not controlled carefully, retrenchment may be a bridge to neo-isolationism. Given the high-flying hegemonic claims of the Bush administration, this outcome is ironic. In view of the rise of new powers in Asia and a reduced American ability to influence allies and adversaries in current crisis areas, the international system is bound to be less U.S.-centered. A move to a less America-centered world may have been in the offing anyway, but Bush administration policy and the 9/11 wars certainly hastened it.

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