

## Delusionary Thinking in Washington The Desperate Plight of a Declining Superpower

Posted by Joan Russow

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By [Michael T. Klare](#)

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Take a look around the world and it's hard not to conclude that the United States is a superpower in decline. Whether in Europe, Asia, or the Middle East, aspiring powers are flexing their muscles, ignoring Washington's dictates, or actively combating them. Russia [refuses](#) to curtail its support for armed separatists in Ukraine; China [refuses](#) to abandon its base-building endeavors in the South China Sea; Saudi Arabia [refuses](#) to endorse the U.S.-brokered nuclear deal with Iran; the Islamic State movement (ISIS) [refuses](#) to capitulate in the face of U.S. airpower. What is a declining superpower supposed to do in the face of such defiance?

This is no small matter. For decades, being a superpower has been the defining characteristic of American identity. The embrace of global supremacy began after World War II when the United States assumed responsibility for resisting Soviet expansionism around the world; it persisted through the Cold War era and only grew after the implosion of the Soviet Union, when the U.S. assumed sole responsibility for combating a whole new array of international threats. As General Colin Powell [famously exclaimed](#) in the final days of the Soviet era, "We have to put a shingle outside our door saying, 'Superpower Lives Here,' no matter what the Soviets do, even if they evacuate from Eastern Europe."

### Imperial Overstretch Hits Washington

Strategically, in the Cold War years, Washington's power brokers assumed that there would always be two superpowers perpetually battling for world dominance. In the wake of the utterly unexpected Soviet collapse, American strategists began to envision a world of just one, of a "sole superpower" (aka [Rome on the Potomac](#)). In line with this new outlook, the administration of George H.W. Bush soon [adopted](#) a

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long-range plan intended to preserve that status indefinitely. Known as the Defense Planning Guidance for Fiscal Years 1994-99, it

[declared](#)

: “Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival, either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere, that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union.”

H.W.’s son, then the governor of Texas, articulated a similar vision of a globally encompassing *Pax Americana* when campaigning for president in 1999. If elected, he [told](#) military cadets at the Citadel in Charleston, his top goal would be “to take advantage of a tremendous opportunity -- given few nations in history -- to extend the current peace into the far realm of the future. A chance to project America’s peaceful influence not just across the world, but across the years.”

For Bush, of course, “extending the peace” would turn out to mean invading Iraq and igniting a devastating regional conflagration that only continues to grow and spread to this day. Even after it began, he did not doubt -- nor (despite the reputed wisdom offered by hindsight) [does he today](#) -- that this was the price that had to be paid for the U.S. to retain its vaunted status as the world’s sole superpower.

The problem, as many mainstream observers now acknowledge, is that such a strategy aimed at perpetuating U.S. global supremacy at all costs was always destined to result in what Yale historian Paul Kennedy, in his classic book [The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers](#) , unforgettably termed “imperial overstretch.” As he presciently wrote in that 1987 study, it would arise from a situation in which “the sum total of the United States’ global interests and obligations is... far larger than the country’s power to defend all of them simultaneously.”

Indeed, Washington finds itself in exactly that dilemma today. What’s curious, however, is just how quickly such overstretch engulfed a country that, barely a decade ago, was being hailed as the planet’s first “[hyperpower](#),” a status even more exalted than superpower. But that was before George W.’s miscalculation in Iraq and other missteps left the U.S. to face a war-ravaged Middle East with an exhausted military and a depleted treasury. At the same time, major and regional powers like China, India, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have been building up their economic and military capabilities and, recognizing the weakness that accompanies imperial overstretch, are beginning to [challenge](#) U.S. dominance in many areas of the globe. The Obama administration has been trying, in one fashion or another, to respond in all of those areas -- among them Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the

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South China Sea -- but without, it turns out, the capacity to prevail in any of them.



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Nonetheless, despite a range of setbacks, no one in Washington's power elite -- Senators Rand Paul and Bernie Sanders being the exceptions that prove the rule -- seems to have the slightest urge to abandon the role of sole superpower or even to back off it in any significant way. President Obama, who is clearly [all too aware](#) of the country's strategic limitations, has been typical in his unwillingness to retreat from such a supremacist vision. "The United States is and remains the one indispensable nation," he [told](#) g  
raduating cadets at West Point in May 2014. "That has been true for the century past and it will be true for the century to come."

How, then, to reconcile the reality of superpower overreach and decline with an unbending commitment to global supremacy?

The first of two approaches to this conundrum in Washington might be thought of as a high-wire circus act. It involves the constant juggling of America's capabilities and commitments, with its limited resources (largely of a military nature) being rushed relatively fruitlessly from one place to another in response to unfolding crises, even as attempts are made to avoid yet more and deeper entanglements. This, in practice, has been the strategy pursued by the current administration. Call it the [Obama Doctrine](#) .

After concluding, for instance, that China had taken advantage of U.S. entanglement in Iraq and Afghanistan to advance its own strategic interests in Southeast Asia, Obama and his top advisers [decided](#) to downgrade the U.S. presence in the Middle East and free up resources for a more robust one in the western Pacific. Announcing this shift in 2011 -- it would first be called a "pivot to Asia" and then a "rebalancing" there -- the president made no secret of the juggling act involved.

"After a decade in which we fought two wars that cost us dearly, in blood and treasure, the United States is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region," he [told](#) m

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embers of the Australian Parliament that November. “As we end today’s wars, I have directed my national security team to make our presence and mission in the Asia Pacific a top priority. As a result, reductions in U.S. defense spending will not -- I repeat, will not -- come at the expense of the Asia Pacific.”

Then, of course, the new Islamic State launched its offensive in Iraq in June 2014 and the American-trained army there collapsed with the loss of [four northern cities](#) . Videoed beheadings of American hostages followed, along with a looming threat to the U.S.-backed regime in Baghdad. Once again, President Obama found himself pivoting -- this time [sending](#) thousands of U.S. military advisers back to that country, [putting](#) American air power into its skies, and laying the groundwork for another major conflict there.

Meanwhile, Republican critics of the president, who [claim](#) he’s doing too little in a losing effort in Iraq (and Syria), have also taken him to task for [not doing enough](#) to implement the pivot to Asia. In reality, as his juggling act that satisfies no one continues in Iraq and the Pacific, he’s had a hard time finding the wherewithal to effectively confront Vladimir Putin in Ukraine, Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the Houthi rebels in Yemen, the various militias fighting for power in fragmenting Libya, and so on.

### The Party of Utter Denialism

Clearly, in the face of multiplying threats, juggling has not proven to be a viable strategy. Sooner or later, the “balls” will simply go flying and the whole system will threaten to fall apart. But however risky juggling may prove, it is not nearly as dangerous as the other strategic response to superpower decline in Washington: utter denial.

For those who adhere to this outlook, it’s not America’s global stature that’s eroding, but its will -- that is, its willingness to talk and act tough. If Washington were simply to speak more loudly, so this argument goes, and brandish bigger sticks, all these challenges would simply melt away. Of course, such an approach can only work if you’re prepared to back up your threats with actual force, or “[hard power](#),” as some like to call it.

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Among the most vocal of those touting this line is [Senator John McCain](#), the chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee and a persistent critic of President Obama. “For five years, Americans have been told that ‘the tide of war is receding,’ that we can pull back from the world at little cost to our interests and values,” he

[typically wrote](#)

in March 2014 in a

*New York Times*

op-ed. “This has fed a perception that the United States is weak, and to people like Mr. Putin, weakness is provocative.” The only way to prevent aggressive behavior by Russia and other adversaries, he stated, is “to restore the credibility of the United States as a world leader.” This means, among other things, arming the Ukrainians and anti-Assad Syrians, bolstering the NATO presence in Eastern Europe,

[combating](#)

“the larger strategic challenge that Iran poses,” and playing a “

[more robust](#)

” role (think: more “boots” on more ground) in the war against ISIS.

Above all, of course, it means a willingness to employ military force. “When aggressive rulers or violent fanatics threaten our ideals, our interests, our allies, and us,” he [declared](#) last November, “what ultimately makes the difference... is the capability, credibility, and global reach of American hard power.”

A similar approach -- in some cases [even more bellicose](#) -- is being articulated by the bevy of Republican candidates now in the race for president, Rand Paul again excepted. At a recent “Freedom Summit” in the early primary state of South Carolina, the various contenders sought to out-hard-power each other. Florida Senator Marco Rubio was

[loudly cheered](#)

for promising to make the U.S. “the strongest military power in the world.” Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker received a standing ovation for pledging to further escalate the war on international terrorists: “I want a leader who is willing to take the fight to them before they take the fight to us.”

In this overheated environment, the 2016 presidential campaign is certain to be dominated by calls for increased military spending, a tougher stance toward Moscow and Beijing, and an expanded military presence in the Middle East. Whatever her personal views, Hillary Clinton, the presumed Democratic candidate, will be forced to demonstrate her backbone by embracing similar positions. In other words, whoever enters the Oval Office in January 2017 will be expected to wield a far bigger stick on a significantly less stable planet. As a result, despite the last decade and a half of [interventionary disasters](#), we’re likely to see an even more interventionist foreign policy with an even greater impulse to use military force.

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However initially gratifying such a stance is likely to prove for John McCain and the growing body of war hawks in Congress, it will undoubtedly prove disastrous in practice. Anyone who believes that the clock can now be turned back to 2002, when U.S. strength was at its zenith and the Iraq invasion had not yet depleted American wealth and vigor, is undoubtedly suffering from delusional thinking. China is [far more powerful](#) than it was 13 years ago, Russia has [largely recovered](#) from its post-Cold War slump, Iran has [replaced](#) the U.S. as the dominant foreign actor in Iraq, and other powers have acquired significantly greater freedom of action in an unsettled world. Under these circumstances, aggressive muscle-flexing in Washington is likely to result only in calamity or humiliation.

### Time to Stop Pretending

Back, then, to our original question: What is a declining superpower supposed to do in the face of this predicament?

Anywhere but in Washington, the obvious answer would be for it to stop pretending to be what it's not. The first step in any 12-step imperial-overstretch recovery program would involve accepting the fact that American power is limited and global rule an impossible fantasy. Accepted as well would have to be this obvious reality: like it or not, the U.S. shares the planet with a coterie of other major powers -- none as strong as we are, but none so weak as to be intimidated by the threat of U.S. military intervention. Having absorbed a more realistic assessment of American power, Washington would then have to focus on how exactly to cohabit with such powers -- Russia, China, and Iran among them -- and manage its differences with them without igniting yet more disastrous regional firestorms.

If strategic juggling and massive denial were not so embedded in the political life of this country's "war capital," this would not be an impossibly difficult strategy to pursue, as others have suggested. In 2010, for example, Christopher Layne of the George H.W. Bush School at Texas A&M [argued](#) in the *American Conservative* that the U.S. could no longer sustain its global superpower status and, "rather than having this adjustment forced upon it suddenly by a major crisis... should get ahead of the curve by shifting its position in a gradual, orderly fashion." Layne and others have [spelled out](#) what this might entail: fewer military entanglements abroad, a diminishing urge to [garrison the planet](#)

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, reduced military spending, greater reliance on allies, more funds to use at home in rebuilding the crumbling infrastructure of a divided society, and a diminished military footprint in the Middle East.

But for any of this to happen, American policymakers would first have to abandon the pretense that the United States remains the sole global superpower -- and that may be too bitter a pill for the present American psyche (and for the political aspirations of certain Republican candidates) to swallow. From such denialism, it's already clear, will only come further ill-conceived military adventures abroad and, sooner or later, under far grimmer circumstances, an American reckoning with reality.

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