'Restoration' Is Not an Option: Why America Can't Afford to Lead from Behind

by Michael Singh **(/experts/michael-singh)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Singh (/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.

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America achieves greatness by setting itself to great tasks, with great conviction; now is a time to streamline our budgets, programs, and expenses, but not our ambitions in the world.

In the August 8 issue of *Time* magazine, Council on Foreign Relations president Richard Haass argues that the United States should institute a foreign policy doctrine that he terms "restoration." The goal of "restoration" is to "rebalance the resources devoted to domestic challenges, as opposed to international ones, in favor of the former." The objective of such a policy, he states, would be "restoring this country's strength and replenishing its resources -- economic, human and physical."

Haass' exhortation to focus on domestic priorities will undoubtedly find a ready audience in a nation, which is weary of war and concerned about its own economic health. And rightly so -- our economy is the foundation upon which our national security rests. If we cannot increase our prosperity and continue to lead the world in areas such as education and innovation, our power and influence in the world will inevitably decline. In this regard, it is necessary that the U.S. exercise greater fiscal discipline and summon the courage to tackle long-term budgetary problems, but it is not sufficient; we must also be careful to remove impediments to economic growth and competitiveness.

In articulating a foreign policy doctrine, however, it is not enough to say that we must shepherd our power through sensible domestic policies. We must determine what we do with our power. It is here that Haass' "restoration" founders.

Anticipating a criticism of his inward-looking policy prescription, Haass asserts that "restoration is not isolationism," and advocates acting internationally when a "rigorous assessment of U.S. interests" argues for doing so. The real question, of course, is how one defines those interests and goes about pursuing them. In Haass' view, the U.S. should define those interests narrowly -- "limit[ing] foreign policy to what matters most" as he puts it. While he

does not exclude the possibility of including "elements of democracy promotion, counterterrorism, and humanitarianism" in foreign policy, he cautions that these policies should be reserved for when "opportunities or exigencies" arise. Haass also allows that in the future a more internationalist approach may be appropriate, but that the U.S. must first "put its own house in order."

This approach, however, results in a foreign policy vision which is too modest to promote American security and prosperity in the long run. We cannot neglect or defer international issues in favor of domestic matters. Our well-being depends not only on political and economic conditions at home, but also those overseas; the view that we can pay heed only to those issues with a direct effect on us and ignore what happens inside countries and communities abroad simply does not fit with today's reality. Our economic prosperity has been globalized as commerce, capital, and labor increasingly moves across national boundaries; so too has our security, as oceans no longer provide the buffer from foreign threats that they once did, and as more Americans live and travel abroad.

Thus, we cannot afford the sequential approach to engagement with the world that Haass proposes, looking first to our own problems before turning outward once again sometime in the future. Opening markets for trade overseas will boost our own economic recovery; encouraging democracy abroad will safeguard our own security. Haass conflates democracy promotion with "ousting authoritarian regimes," but this is misleading. The promotion of democracy, human and civil rights, and free markets comprises a range of actions and policies -- multilateral and bilateral, using hard and soft power, involving the public sector and private sector. Haass is right, of course, to counsel caution when it comes to war and underscore the need to understand clearly our aims, capabilities, and constraints in our foreign dealings; but this does not necessitate a foreign policy of modest aspirations.

In Haass' framework, issues such as democracy promotion, human rights, and free markets may not involve vital interests or direct threats -- "what matters most," in other words. But such thinking is shortsighted. A successful foreign policy should not only protect current interests and address today's threats; it should expand the universe of opportunities for American interests overseas, and defuse threats before they materialize. Emphasizing democracy, human rights, and free trade and investment means expanding future economic opportunities and cultivating tomorrow's leaders even as you deal with today's. By doing these things, we seek to create an international context which is more hospitable to the entire range of American interests, rather than simply pursuing them individually.

If the U.S. wishes to restore our strength, we must understand the sources of our strength. As previously noted, our economic health is the foundation of our national security. But this is a two-way street -- our willingness to (wisely) exercise leadership overseas, shoulder global responsibilities, and shape rather than passively accept the international order reinforces our own economic prosperity and vibrancy. For decades we have understood this and sought to promote political and economic liberty abroad even while dealing with crises at home; should we now set aside these burdens and turn inward, it will be not only to the world's detriment, but our own. America achieves greatness by setting ourselves to great tasks, with great conviction; now is a time to streamline our budgets, programs, and expenses, but not our ambitions in the world.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute and a former senior director for Middle East affairs at the National Security Council. ❖

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