

“Cold and Hot Wars”: U.S. Has No Choice but to Exercise Restraint in Military Matters, Scholars Argue

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Ravi Agrawal, Foreign Policy editor in chief, has [interviewed](#) historian Stephen Wertheim, a senior fellow in the American Statecraft Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. In this interview, Wertheim argues that the US is overextending its power and therefore should restrain itself in Taiwan and Ukraine, among other places.

Washington has of course been providing essential support to Kiev in its current conflict with Moscow. Meanwhile, it is engaged in a new cold war with Beijing.

The American scholar notes that, even though US **President Joe Biden** came into office proclaiming that “America is back” (after years of former President Donald Trump’s relative “isolationism”, if you may call it that, though only relatively), the current American president in fact [withdrew from Afghanistan](#) and seemed to reject the idea of a “forever war” there. Moreover, he also initially pursued a “stable and predictable relationship” with Moscow.

One should say it did not last much, though. Not too long after removing its troops from Afghanistan, Biden escalated the American [forever war in Somalia](#), for example. And, one year after that withdrawal, the US now finds itself entrenched in two arenas simultaneously, while it tries to encircle and contain two superpowers at once.

An interesting point Stephen Wertheim makes is that by pushing the narrative that the conflict in Ukraine is all about **“a defense of democracy”, albeit Ukraine could hardly be described as a democratic country from a Western or anyone’s perspective**, the US and its global North allies in fact alienate and exclude much of the global south. The [US “human rights” and “democracy” narrative](#) that informs much of its foreign policy, in any case, is simply a weaponization of these very concepts, as anyone can easily tell just by paying any attention to the covering up of [Ukraine’s own record](#) on this, for instance.

Wertheim also argues that the American “engagement” strategy was really about regime change, in an attempt to make China look like a liberal democracy Western country. This has been replaced today by a “containment” strategy, but the truth is that neither approach has worked. What he proposes is a “mutual coexistence”, based on the premise that Beijing has “its own system” (albeit one which the US does not approve of). In this scenario, for the sake of avoiding the serious risks of a “great-power war” Washington would not try to “change the Chinese regime” and would acknowledge that “not all aspects of Chinese power run counter to U.S. interests in the world” – plus “some things are also not worth antagonizing China over.”

Thus, Stephen Wertheim reasons that the White House should go back to its own One China Policy, as it had been practiced for decades, though still maintaining some degree of “strategic ambiguity” on Taiwan, so as not to provoke and corner the Chinese into thinking they will need to act there. The academic goes beyond that and, in practice, argues that Washington “doesn’t have vital interests implicated in the Middle East” and therefore should “draw down” its security partnerships there. In the same way, it should pursue a “transition” in Europe so that Europeans themselves lead the defense of their own continent.

Wertheim’s defense of “restraint” (or so-called “offshore balancing”) echoes that of Stephen M. Walt, a Harvard University professor of international relations, who adopts a realist stance on foreign policy. Walt has been defending that there is not much need for the US to deploy significant forces neither in Europe nor in the Middle East, and that a more restrained foreign policy would free up resources for much needed long-term domestic investments in the nation’s future. Walt [argues](#) that realists were correct about the dangers of NATO enlargement, the Iraq war, about Afghanistan, and so on. Thus, they should be heard.

In a similar “pro-restraint” vein, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has been urging peace talks with Russia, necessarily involving some territorial compromise in Ukraine, so as to avoid a permanent break with Moscow. Realist scholar John J. Mearsheimer in turn has also [warned](#) that the US-led Western policy toward Ukraine would lead to trouble, as have many other realists.

These calls for restraint are not only feasible but are in fact quite urgent. Europe already seems to be slowly “[abandoning](#)” Ukraine, which, from the US perspective, overburdens Washington. The US is already overextending its power in its effort to contain two superpowers at once. If one stretches too far, one breaks, as the saying goes. It is about time Washington exercises some restraint – in Taiwan, Ukraine and beyond.

“Containment” has simply not worked and the unipolar moment has already passed – whether the American establishment likes it or not. Therefore, the United States needs to get out of the escalatory dynamic it has put itself into, for the sake of global peace; and it must surrender much of its military overcommitment.

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