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A Double-Edged Sword: An Analysis of Richard Betts' Understanding of Primacy as a Strength and a Threat to US National Security

With his article, "The Soft Underbelly of American Primacy: Tactical Advantages of Terror," Richard Betts discusses the ways American global primacy is often overestimated and misunderstood and the ways that contributes to anti-American sentiments and terrorism, while highlighting potential vulnerabilities for the United States. While he does not pose a single, explicit research question, his central argument looks to explain the downsides and unintended consequences of US international dominance, explaining the extent to which American global primacy is misconceived and overexaggerated, the ways the perception of American hegemony contributes to terrorism, the potential downsides to US global leadership, the benefits of restraints of American power, and ways to frame that balance between caution and leadership (Betts 450-51). While he acknowledges that terrorism is a term that is often interpreted in different ways and consensus is difficult to gain, for his purposes, he defines terrorism as the "illegitimate, deliberate killing of civilians for purposes of punishment or coercion" (Betts 450). Betts argues throughout his article, that the overall misunderstanding and overestimation of America's global primacy contributes to anti-American sentiments and vulnerabilities at the hands of terrorism. He positions primacy as a dual strength and weakness, resulting from the tendency of Americans to view primacy as an absolute positive, the resentment that arises

internationally from perceptions of US hegemony, and the unintended consequences that can come from faulty assumptions of perpetual dominance. He proposes the US exercise power in a more restrained and cautious manner to mitigate negative consequences, while emphasizing the importance of balancing the benefits and drawbacks of primacy as it can also be a solution to terror despite its dual status as a root (Betts 465-66). The argument and evidence he provides explain a more critical view of American global primacy and strategy following September 11 than was often held by the American public and what impacts the various paths could have on policy decision-making, however, there are several limitations. These limitations include contextual changes since the article's initial publication in 2002, limited considerations of public opinions and political costs, and the subjectivity of his argument and its interpretations. Overall, Betts' argument is a strong one and the evidence he provides does a decent job at supporting it, but if this argument is to be interpreted and applied to current-day situations for explaining the cycle of terror and war, it is important to keep in mind and take note of its limitations.

Betts begins his article by laying out what is necessary to fully understand the implications of the United States prioritizing the war on terror after 9/11: the connections between power imbalances of terrorist groups and counterterrorist state governments, the reasons for terror strategies, and the offense-defense advantage for terrorists. With the world that emerged after 9/11, Betts argues, Americans were confronted with the fact that the US global power that had arisen in the post-Cold War era was not the supremacy many had mistaken it for, and that it was the global power itself that was a root of US insecurity. He notes that though America's power is fuel for terrorist groups and those with anti-American sentiments, it is the same power that prevents all-out war, and as the US launches a war on terror, that primacy will

continue to protect American interests if deployed correctly (Betts 449-451). His arguments are similar to those outlined in other works on US national security and international relations, like Robert Art's "Fungibility of Force," Robert Jervis' "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," Andrew Bacevich's "Secrets That Were No Secret," Barry Posen's "Case for Restraint," and Audrey Cronin's "How al-Qaida Ends." Art's article echoes Betts' arguments in their shared examinations of the unintended consequences of power and military force (Art 25) and the need for adaptability in foreign policy (Art 8-9), providing a source of support for Betts' suggestions. Jervis' argument about the security dilemma and the nature of defense strategies as a potential trigger for action by other states and the role of misperceptions in security focuses mostly on state-vs-state interactions (169, 174), but it can also be applicable to Betts' arguments about the post-9/11 world. Though Betts notes that it was the characteristics of US society like liberalism and respect for privacy that allowed the 9/11 attacks to occur without US awareness (Betts 457), the retaliatory allowances for surveillance opens US-terror group relations up to the influence of the security dilemma when it is America's power that triggers anti-American sentiment to fuel terror acts.

Beyond similarities to other theories in international relations, Bacevich's article echos Betts' own commentary about the Vietnam War and draws the connection to the implications of the war in Afghanistan. Betts points out the ways the US involvement in Vietnam is sometimes viewed as a failure and that attacks there have been framed similarly to the framing of modern terror attacks (Betts 450, 467), and these same themes are repeated by Bacevich as he discusses the lessons that could have been learned from Vietnam and applied in Afghanistan to prevent further anti-American sentiment from growing. Furthermore, Posen's article provides greater

support for Betts' argument in a more direct manner, with a similar theme of exercising caution in terms of American power, proposing continued wariness of the potential for unintended consequences, and awareness of the issues with assumptions, despite Posen's main focus on avoiding unnecessary conflicts, as opposed to Betts' analysis of the impacts of primacy. Finally, Cronin's article about the demise of terrorist groups discusses the assumptions the US has made about the war on terrorism, giving a contextual example of the impacts of the strategy Betts argues caution with applying. Cronin's arguments about the misguiding assumptions the US made that eliminating al-Qaeda would end the war on terror as a failure in acknowledging history and the reactionary formulation of counterterrorism policy (47) showcase the double-edged sword Betts discusses about American primacy being both the solution and cause for terror when exercised appropriately (466). Each of the articles supports Betts' arguments, however indirectly for some, by showing the nature of the power Betts warns caution in when using, in some cases showing the outcomes of using that power, especially in search of retaliation, providing context that supports and strengthens Betts' argument.

To support his argument within the article, Betts draws evidence from historical events, analyses of the geopolitical environment, and strategic considerations that highlight his proposal of the potential downsides and vulnerabilities caused by American primacy. He looks at the perceptions of historical events from the perspective of America's opponents to understand terrorists' underestimations of American power in contrast to American overestimations, and his cited events include the Vietnam War, Beirut, and Somalia as failures of American intervention, while Panama, Kuwait, Kosovo, and Afghanistan are successes (Betts 467). With his focus on the war on terror, Betts uses September 11 as an example that demonstrates how America's power

has fueled terror attacks, and that American overestimation of their own power further enabled it (Betts 457). Furthering the focus on the war on terror, Betts also goes into a discussion about the immediate counterterrorism efforts following 9/11, including the war in Afghanistan as a simultaneous retaliation and defense (464). While he cites it as necessary to demonstrate that the US was not going to break, he also notes it as a contribution to further polarization and mobilization of anti-American sentiment and potential terrorists (Betts 457), an example of that double-edge to primacy as a threat and solution to US security.

Betts not only looks at events, but also the global landscape and the various geopolitical alliances, regions, and conflicts that have fueled anger against America. These included the US commitment to Israel at the expense of Palestinians (Betts 454), United Nations and NATO alliances (Betts 452), as well as the relations and dynamics within the Middle East and Arab region (Betts 454). His acknowledgement of global politics highlights the complexities and influences that lead to and encourage anti-American sentiment on one side and American belief in their complete strength on the other. Finally, Betts also raises strategic considerations and policy choices as evidence, such as decisions that led to the framing of involvement in Afghanistan that, though portrayed as not being a war on Islam, increases distrust in those already wary of the US due to perceptions of it being just that (Betts 457). Other considerations include the withdrawal and failure in Somalia that is seen by some as a failure of American power, but by the US is viewed as a strategic move (Betts 453, 467), and investments in healthcare systems, law enforcement, bureaucratic programs, and defensive measures to protect security as a way to signal the continuance of American power to both its enemies and its people, though they do not actionably minimize vulnerability according to Betts (464).

The evidence Betts provides helps support his argument, especially given the context of other writings on international relations and national security. Such writings include Janina Dill and Livia Schubiger's "Attitudes toward the Use of Force," Scott Sagan and Benjamin Valentino's "Not Just a War Theory," Andrew Payne's "Bargaining with the Military," Karl Eikenberry's "Limits of Counterinsurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan," C. William Walldorf's "Narratives and War," and Nilay Saiya et al.'s "Testing the Hillary Doctrine." Dill and Schubiger's, Walldorf's, and Sagan and Valentino's pieces focus on the influence of public attitudes in military action, which is an important point of consideration for the context that surrounds Betts' piece, though he has limited discussion of it. Walldorf examines the impact of traumatic group events on the collective stories and how these strategic narratives influence counter strategies, while Dill and Schubiger and Sagan and Valentino focus on the influence of public opinion. Though Betts does not explicitly discuss these points, the context of 9/11 and the following launch of the war on terror is influenced by the collective narratives and public support for retaliation, giving weight to Betts' own arguments about the ways in which primacy impacts security, partly as a result of the public opinions on it. Payne approaches public opinion from another viewpoint, looking at the political costs for American leaders, and when applying this to the time following the September 11 attacks and Betts' context, the weight of these costs can also be seen in the way retaliation and primacy were prioritized, something that for Betts could both be used to solve terror and as a root cause for more (Betts 457).

Beyond public opinion, the argument pushed in Eikenberry's work provides an example of the challenges of American global primacy in action. Though Betts touches on the challenges in Afghanistan, his article's original publication in 2002 meant there was little time for

understanding the long-term ramifications of American involvement there, whereas Eikenberry was able to delve into the challenges that arose because of the misperceptions and miscalculations in trying to demonstrate American power (61). Finally, Saiya et al.'s piece, though not directly related, does provide another voice advocating for a shift in strategy, pushing for greater attention on women's rights particularly in respect to terrorism (429). Though Betts gives no indication towards pushing a similar idea, his advocacy for rethinking the American global primacy strategy for more balance and consideration of benefits and drawbacks to enhance security against terrorism could involve incorporating Saiya et al.'s recommendations. It is important to understand the space and surrounding environment of other writings to better understand the arguments being pushed by Betts and the evidence he provides as his writing does not exist within a vacuum but is influenced by the ideas and theories of other scholars.

With the evidence he provides and greater context of other related writings, Betts' argument is convincing and important to understand for US national security as it raises considerations for protecting US national interests and mitigating the threat terrorism poses, though his argument is not without its limitations, especially if it is to be applied to the contemporary environment. Betts' article was originally published in 2002, and the world and political dynamics have evolved since then. As demonstrated with the further context and information Eikenberry's analysis of the COIN doctrine provides, Betts' article is limited to the time of its publication and the nature of the geopolitical landscape at the time, with limited empirical evidence for understanding the evolution of primacy through the war on terror. While this should be kept in mind, his argument remains relevant for applicability to current threats, even including relations with Russia or China, for example, and avoiding an escalatory dynamic

of power plays. Though Betts indirectly hints at the influence of public opinion on primacy and power, through his discussions of Americans' views on power (Betts 466), his very limited consideration of public opinion and political costs is a weakness of his argument as well. He mainly focuses on the impact of external factors and the role of the US in the international system, but more attention to domestic factors should have been given to understand the ways primacy can be shaped and actions taken in pursuit of, particularly given his focus on 9/11 and the war on terror, which as Walldorf points out is a collective trauma with group narratives that shape political responses.

Like any argument and academic work, Betts' argument, conclusions, and interpretations of his selected evidence are subject to interpretation and varying perspectives. For example, Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth look to similar examples of American global engagement as evidence to support continuing the strategy of primacy, in direct opposition to Posen's analysis of similar evidence as reason for stronger restraint. Betts falls mostly between the two, advocating for a balance and consideration of the benefits and drawbacks to primacy as a strategy as a way to protect national interests and end terrorism, but it goes to show that the argument is subjective. While this is natural and it is a matter of deciding which argument and evidence is most convincing, bearing in mind the subjectivity is crucial for understanding the dynamics that arise because of American global primacy and instances of American engagement, especially amidst shifts in circumstances like public opinion, political leadership turnover, or economic conditions.

In spite of these limitations, Betts' argument and evidence are strong enough that it makes it an important consideration for understanding US national security strategy and

interests. These connections include his focus on public consensus, international perceptions, and strategy recommendations. It is the misinterpretations of power by the public and international perceptions that can garner resentment and terrorism that highlight the ways primacy impacts national security and underscores the need to be aware of these considerations when examining strategy and protecting interests. Not only does Betts' argument look at the implications on national security, but part of his argument is also recommending a strategy of balancing considerations about playing a global role when considering potential American global involvement, and future US national security strategy.

Betts' argument is not perfect by any means, but it does its job in sufficiently arguing for a more cautious security strategy and challenging the assumption that American primacy is an indisputable strategic asset, involving a critical examination of any costs and risks that come with global dominance without calling for a complete aversion to maintaining primacy. His argument contributes to the greater conversation about American exceptionalism and considerations of continued engagement, something that continues to be a pressing topic of debate. His article is limited by the time of its initial publication in 2002, so its discussion of the war on terror focuses on the immediate aftermath of 9/11, but his ideas about considering a reduction in exceptionalism and balancing the considerations of global dominance are applicable to conflicts now, like the Israel-Hamas war, and the conversations following the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. Global relations have continued to evolve, yet take on similar dynamics in various aspects, and the considerations to avoid escalation of resentment and retaliation remain applicable for inter-state dynamics as well as continued concerns of terrorism, including US-Russia and US-China relations and fear of escalatory power plays. Overall, though the argument

and evidence are mostly based around the dynamics that led to terrorism of the September 11 effect, it is malleable and strong enough to have relevance for conflicts and international relations over two decades later.

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