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LETTER September/October 2009 Issue



The Limits of Power Projection

By Andrew J. Bacevich



To the Editor:

Andrew Krepinevich ("The Pentagon's Wasting Assets," July/August 2009) writes that "the military foundations of the United States' global dominance are eroding," compromising the nation's "unmatched ability to project power worldwide." He would have us believe that unless reversed, this trend will produce dire consequences.

The problem with Krepinevich's argument lies in its assumptions that "global dominance" is possible and that global power projection by the United States offers the most effective way of ensuring international peace and stability. Recent events call both assumptions into question.

Krepinevich claims that U.S. dominance, expressed through the projection of hard power, has produced a "long record of military successes." Yet this contention is difficult to sustain given episodes such as those experienced by the U.S. military in Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq (both in 1991 and since 2003) -- not to mention the devastation of 9/11. It would be more accurate to say that force -- even when wielded by the seemingly strong against the nominally weak -- continues to be an exceedingly uncertain instrument. The United States' penchant for projecting power has created as many problems as it has solved. Genuinely decisive outcomes remain rare, costs often far exceed expectations, and unintended and unwelcome consequences are legion.

A decade ago, some argued that the key to achieving permanent dominance could be found in "transformation," a radical reconfiguration of the U.S. military meant to exploit the potential of advanced information technology. Krepinevich writes, disapprovingly, that this proposed new American way of war "faced stiff resistance" from dissidents within the military and that "the price for such willful ignorance can be steep." Actually, it was the price of taking the bogus promises of transformation seriously that proved steep, as the debacle in Iraq amply demonstrated. These days, with transformation retaining about as much credibility as "unregulated markets," the skeptics have come off looking a lot better than the proponents.

In fact, the pursuit of military dominance is an illusion, the principal effect of which is to distort strategic judgment by persuading policymakers that they have at hand the means to make short work of history's complexities. Krepinevich argues that there is "a compelling need to develop new ways of creating military advantage." As much as I respect his general acumen, however, on this point he is fundamentally wrong. The real need is to wean the United States from its infatuation with military power and come to a more modest appreciation of what force can and cannot do.

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