

For a country of over a quarter billion people, an occupation force of this size is trivial. The tendency of the United States to overdramatize minor interventions derives from its relative immaturity as a nation (and I say this as a parent of someone who served two tours in Iraq).

The foregoing allows us to understand the American response to the Islamist attacks and much else that has happened. Having systematically achieved its strategic goals, the United States had the ultimate aim of preventing the emergence of any major power in Eurasia. The paradox, however, is as follows: the goal of these interventions was never to achieve something—whatever the political rhetoric might have said—but to prevent something. The United States wanted to prevent stability in areas where another power might emerge. Its goal was not to stabilize, but to destabilize. And that explains how the United States responded to the Islamic earthquake—it wanted to prevent a large, powerful Islamic state from emerging.

Rhetoric aside, the United States has no overriding interest in peace in Eurasia. The United States also has no interest in winning a war outright. As with Vietnam or Korea, the purpose of these conflicts is simply to block a power or destabilize the region, not to impose order. In due course, even outright American defeat is acceptable. However, the principle of using minimum force, when absolutely necessary, to maintain the Eurasian balance of power is—and will remain—the driving force of U.S. foreign policy throughout the twenty-first century. There will be numerous Kosovos and Iraqs in unanticipated places at unexpected times. U.S. actions will appear irrational, and would be if the primary goal is to stabilize the Balkans or the Middle East. But since the primary goal will more likely be simply to block or destabilize Serbia or al Qaeda, the interventions will be quite rational. They will never appear to really yield anything nearing a "solution," and will always be done with insufficient force to be decisive.

#### AFTER THE AFTERSHOCKS

The international system is now badly out of balance. The United States is so powerful that it is almost impossible for the rest of the world to control

American behavior. The natural tendency of the international system is to move to equilibrium. In an unbalanced world, smaller powers are at risk from larger, unchecked powers. They therefore tend to form coalitions with other countries to match the larger power in strength. After the United States was defeated in Vietnam, it joined with China to control the Soviets, who appeared to be getting too strong.

Creating coalitions to contain the United States in the twenty-first century will be extremely difficult. Weaker countries find it easier to reach an accommodation with the Americans than to join an anti-U.S. coalition—building a coalition and holding it together is an onerous task. And if the coalition falls apart, as coalitions tend to do, the United States can be an unforgiving giant.

As a result, we see this contradiction: on the one hand, the United States is deeply resented and feared; on the other hand, individual nations still try to find a way to get along with the United States. This disequilibrium will dominate the twenty-first century, as will efforts to contain the United States. It will be a dangerous century, particularly for the rest of the world.

In geopolitics there is a key measure known as the "margin of error." It predicts how much room a country has for making mistakes. The margin of error consists of two parts: the types of danger faced by a nation and the amount of power it possesses. Some countries have very small margins of error. They tend to obsess over the smallest detail of foreign policy, aware that the slightest misstep can be catastrophic. Israel and Palestine do not have massive margins of error, because of their small size and their location. Iceland, on the other hand, has a lot of room for mistakes. It is small but lives in a roomy neighborhood.

The United States has a huge margin of error. It is safe in North America and has tremendous power. The United States therefore tends to be careless in how it exercises its power globally. It's not stupid. It simply doesn't need to be more careful—in fact, being more careful could often reduce its efficiency. Like a banker prepared to make bad loans in the expectation that he will do well in the long run, the United States has a policy of making moves that other countries see as reckless. The results would be painful or even devastating for other countries. The United States moves on and flourishes.