

Rule by Proxy Is New U.S. Leadership Model

By [Dominique Moisi](#)

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The demise of the Roman Empire resulted from a combination of strategic overreach and excessive delegation of security responsibilities to newcomers. Without making undue comparisons, the question for the U.S. today is whether it can remain the world's leading power while delegating to others or to technological tools the task of protecting its global influence.

Using nonhuman weapons such as drones and relying on the armed forces of U.S. allies rather than their own have become central to the U.S. military doctrine. The U.S. shift of emphasis by leading the world from behind in terms of troops on the ground, while at the same time remaining a cutting-edge technological military power, is impossible to ignore.

First, there was the combined French and British action in Libya that led to the overthrow of Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi's regime. Then came French intervention in Mali, and now Israeli airstrikes in Syria. Each case is, of course, different, but all have something in common: The United States has not been on the front line of intervention. Yet, without

direct U.S. military support or indirect — and in some cases implicit — political support, it is difficult to imagine that such risky operations would have been initiated. Have the British, French and even Israelis become armed extensions of the U.S. in their respective spheres of influence?

The model is
a product of a
long-term
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ambivalence
toward
the outside
world.

If so, the contrast with the recent past could hardly be starker. In the aftermath of the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Americans simply could not envisage sharing their security responsibilities with others. At best, Europeans could be the United States' "cleaning ladies," to use the indelicate analogy coined at the time by some neoconservative thinkers during former U.S. President George W. Bush's first term in office.

But, even before 9/11, some U.S. conservatives had expressed disdain toward their European allies. I still remember the warning uttered by a top U.S. diplomat in Strasbourg in the early 1990s, on the eve of the Balkan wars. "If we leave Europeans in charge of themselves, they will prove irresponsible, divisive and suicidal, and then we will have to rescue them from themselves." Today, Americans are only too happy to rely on the military competence and interventionist inclinations of some — in fact, very few — of their European friends.

It would be easy to interpret this shift as a response to the high human and economic cost of U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet the reality is more complex.

The United States' newfound taste for delegating military responsibilities to others is not the result of a series of events but the product of a long-term process driven by the U.S. ambivalence toward the world and active engagement with it.

Is it worth fighting for a world that cannot be saved, and that only invites murky, inconclusive entanglements?

From this perspective, the U.S. involvement in World War I and, even more so, in World War II, are exceptions to the rule. The U.S. troops that landed on Normandy beaches in June 1944 were animated by a strong sense of mission. They knew that they were fighting evil in an environment that was historically and culturally familiar.

In Vietnam, however, U.S. soldiers, many of them black, often did not understand why they were fighting. In Iraq, their equivalents were very often Latinos for whom integration into U.S. society — including, for many, the promise of permanent residence or citizenship — was at least as important as toppling Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

When a country engages in the world, its authority stems from its willingness and ability

to take "personal" risks. Its authority is diminished when the perceived gap between the value of its population's lives and the lives of its enemies is too wide.

In this respect, drone warfare reinforces the perverse nature of "asymmetrical wars." In her recent book "Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control," Medea Benjamin, a peace activist and shrewd observer of international relations, makes a crucial point: "While drones make it easier to kill some bad guys, they also make it easier to go to war."

Likewise, delegating security to allies can have perverse psychological effects. This is particularly true in the Middle East. How can the U.S. exert pressure on Israel to engage in serious peace negotiations with the Palestinians, or to refrain from attacking Iran, when it offers encouragement — if only through public silence — to Israeli military intervention in Syria? If the United States' purpose is to deliver a message to Iran — "Beware, you could be the next target" — many will question its sincerity about restraining Israel.

For some, the U.S. has moved from too much engagement under Bush to doing too little under U.S. President Barack Obama. For others, Obama is merely pursuing Bush's foreign policy through other means: drones instead of soldiers.

The reality is probably somewhere in between, but it is clearly not beneficial to the U.S., its allies or global stability. Precisely because the U.S. remains indispensable to international security, one wishes that its leaders would act in a more discerning way. In international politics, as in education, there is no such thing as care by proxy. If responsibility is to be exercised effectively, it cannot be delegated to machines or other countries.

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