



Sustaining America's Security: An Interview With Benjamin Valentino

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Distinguished international relations scholar Benjamin A. Valentino discusses why America's security strategy has become so unsustainable and how this problem can be effectively resolved.

Q. Your book (co-edited with Jeremi Suri) *Sustainable Security: Rethinking American National Security Strategy* was published last year. The book starts from the premise held by several analysts and scholars that America's approach to national security has become unsustainable. In what ways is America's security strategy unsustainable and how long has this been the case?

The idea for the book was first conceived during the 2008 financial crisis. At that point in time it had become clear to almost everyone that military budgets would need to be cut. And indeed, the total U.S. defense budget quickly stabilized and then began to decline. But Jeremi and I and many of our colleagues were concerned that Americans might see the unsustainability of American foreign policy solely in financial terms. We suspected that even the relatively modest financial belt tightening that occurred as a result of the crisis would prove short lived. Just as bad, we saw that the cuts to the budget were being made across the board, and without a well thought out plan to define what parts of the budget to cut and what should be spared. We viewed the threats to the sustainability of American security in much broader terms. Most importantly, that meant America's ever-expanding network of foreign policy commitments – which are the main drivers of our defense budget. But it also includes a wide array of other ways in which America's security strategy has become unsustainable.

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Our security strategy is in danger of becoming unsustainable politically, since the justifications for the kind of expansive foreign policy the United States developed during the Cold War were no longer relevant. Our strategy is also unsustainable environmentally, since we have failed to take actions to remediate the threat of climate change – one of the few potentially existential threats facing the United States today. And our strategy is unsustainable institutionally, since many of the domestic and international institutions that we developed to implement and advance our security policies have become obsolete and increasingly unable to deal with the new range of threats facing the United States.

Q. In the book, America's network of overseas alliances and defence commitments are described as a key foundation of American foreign policy. There is much discussion on whether these commitments continue to advance America's national interests and how, if they don't, they can be transformed. Which of America's commitments and alliances are currently proving to be the most problematic?

Rather than taking a single position on exactly which alliances need to be revisited, I think the main argument of the book is that America needs a clearer grand strategy to justify decisions about our foreign commitments. The expansive network of formal and informal alliances that America has today was largely formed at the end of the Second World War. Its purpose at that time was to contain the spread of communism and deter war with the Soviet Union. Neither of those goals is relevant today. Nevertheless, we not only have the same basic alliance portfolio that we had 70 years ago, we have not articulated a new strategy that explains why the alliance partners we have remain the best ones to advance our national interests. Rather, many of our alliances seem to

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have developed a life of their own. They are justified using circular logic – if we don't defend our allies, our allies won't trust us.

If the United States did not already have a longstanding alliance with South Korea today, for example, would most Americans advocate forming one – even though that alliance runs the risk of entangling the United States in a nuclear war? If we did choose to establish an alliance with South Korea, would it take the form it does today – one that severely restricts the ability of U.S. forces there to operate off the Korean Peninsula?

Q. What are the most pressing issues that America needs to address in order to move towards a more sustainable security strategy?

Again, we think the first step in bringing our commitments and resources into alignment is to develop a coherent strategy that helps America know when to say yes and when to say no. One of the chief lessons of our book is that we need strategy to discipline policy. Without the kind of overarching strategy that the United States had during the Cold War, our foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has become a kind of grab-bag of legacy commitments, competing interests, and contradictory priorities.

The contributors to the volume have diverse perspectives on what kind of strategy should replace the one we have. Some prefer that the United States seek to maintain a global leadership role and retain many of its existing alliances, although usually with different goals and structures. Others would prefer that the United States pare back many of its overseas commitments and focus on mending our domestic economy and political system. All of our contributors agree, however, that the time has come for a systematic reevaluation of the foundations of America's existing foreign policy.

The United States needs a vigorous and methodical public debate about America's interests in the world today, the threats to those interests, and the most effective ways to protect them with the limited resources available to us. Without answers to those questions, foreign policy decision makers will continue to lack the means to decide which commitments to keep and which to restructure or conclude. They will lack the means to justify which threats require a response and what shape that response can take. Generating a strategy that will achieve the same degree of consensus as containment did during the Cold War will require creativity and shrewd politics. It will likely take several years of concerted effort. That is why the time to start this debate is now.

Q. As the book is an edited volume, it brings together various disciplinary approaches. The chapters by historians are particularly interesting as they give insights into how powerful countries of the past have succeeded and failed in adjusting to broad shifts in political economy. What are some of the key lessons that the US can learn from history when attempting to shift its strategy?

We think one of the strengths of the book is that it brings historians and political scientists together to focus on contemporary policy problems. The historians remind us that America is not the first nation to grapple with the long-term sustainability of its security strategy. Indeed, this is not the first time the United States has had to struggle to bring its means and ends into alignment.

Most great powers have faced similar dilemmas. History shows that it is much easier to recognize that one is on an unsustainable path than it is to chart a path back to sustainability. One reason for this is that the people and

institutions that are responsible for protecting our security seldom change as quickly as the world does. Our ideas and organizations tend to be “sticky.” It’s always easier to invent new reasons to keep doing the things we’ve been doing than to make a fundamental change.

Q. Is it possible for what could be described as more ethical international commitments such as the capacity to respond and prevent mass atrocities and genocide through humanitarian initiatives to be incorporated into a sustainable security approach that also serves America’s interests?

I believe so. Protecting and promoting our ethics and ideals abroad is as much a part of our national security as protecting our material interests. Indeed, a security strategy that abandoned ethical principles would not be sustainable in the long run. It would alienate the American public and key allies, who have long supported international humanitarian efforts. It would make it easier for our adversaries to portray us as amoral and selfish.

Promoting America’s humanitarian impulses through military intervention as the United States increasingly has done, however, is probably neither sustainable nor effective. America needs to find new ways to promote human rights and expand democracy that do not rely on military force – especially unilateral force. As in other areas of national security, this will mean making some painful choices. The United States alone cannot save everyone who needs saving. But America will probably end up saving more lives by facilitating negotiations or protecting refugees than by dropping bombs.

Q. The book was published before the rise of Trump. How much do you feel his administration will affect the hopes of America moving towards a more sustainable approach to security in the long and short term?

Although President Trump has challenged several long-held assumptions of the American foreign policy establishment, unfortunately his rhetoric has tended to obfuscate the key questions and trade-offs rather than promote the kind of reasoned debate we think is necessary. So far, none of the most significant departures from existing foreign policy that he advocated on the campaign trail (abolishing NATO, abandoning South Korea, forging closer relations with Russia, pulling out of Afghanistan) have come to pass. Indeed, we are closer than ever to war in Korea, we have sent more troops to Afghanistan and relations with Russia are at an all-time low. At the same time, President Trump has advocated significantly increasing the military budget and the size of America's nuclear arsenal without articulating any overarching strategy to justify those choices.

Q. What are the greatest international threats and obstacles to America moving towards greater sustainability in its security strategy?

I think most of our contributors would agree that the single greatest threat is America's profoundly broken domestic political system. Americans used to profess that "politics stopped at the water's edge," but that adage is no longer true. Virtually every major issue in American foreign policy is increasingly polarized. Although there is still widespread agreement among Americans that the United States should maintain an active role in world affairs, specific issues ranging from support for international organizations like the UN, to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to immigration, to support for international agreements on issues like climate change and free trade have become deeply partisan. This trend has combined with a long standing American ignorance about the world beyond our shores to create the same kind of deadlock in foreign affairs as in domestic politics. America must first heal itself if it hopes to protect itself.

Image credit: U.S. Air Force by Staff Sgt. Evelyn Chavez/Public Domain.

Benjamin Valentino is an Associate Professor of Government at Dartmouth College. His research interests include the causes and consequences of violent conflict and American foreign and security policies. At Dartmouth he teaches courses on international relations, international security, American foreign policy, the causes and prevention of genocide and serves as co-director the Government Department Honors Program. He is also the faculty coordinator for the War and Peace Studies Program at Dartmouth's Dickey Center for International Understanding. Professor Valentino's book, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the 20th Century*, received the Edgar S. Furniss Book Award for making an exceptional contribution to the study of national and international security. His work has appeared in outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The American Political Science Review*, *Security Studies*, *International Organization*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *World Politics* and *The Journal of Politics*. He is currently working on several research projects focusing on public opinion on the use of force and developing early warning models of large-scale violence against civilians.

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