

American Military Power and World Peace: A Strategic Paradox?

Written by Tewfik Hamel

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TEWFIK HAMEL, AUG 28 2025

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has maintained an unparalleled global military posture, embodying what some analysts have called an “empire of bases” (Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire*, 2004). With nearly 750 military facilities across more than 80 countries (IISS, 2024), the U.S. continues to project power on a scale unmatched in history. This presence, supported by a defense budget exceeding \$860 billion in 2023 – more than the next ten countries combined – demonstrates that military power remains the cornerstone of American global influence. Yet, this dominance is increasingly contested. The end of the “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer, 1990; Mearsheimer, 2018) has seen the rise of peer competitors such as China and Russia, as well as the proliferation of asymmetric threats. Moreover, the American military’s centrality in shaping international order raises a paradox: while intended to ensure peace and stability, the very omnipresence of U.S. forces often generates insecurity, dependence, and strategic backlash.

This article examines the militarization of U.S. foreign policy, analyzing how the United States uses its armed forces as a tool of global governance, and the implications of this reliance on military power for international peace. It explores five interrelated dimensions: (1) The ideological and strategic roots of American militarism; (2) The global network of bases and the geography of U.S. power; (3) The centrality of military instruments in American foreign policy; (4) The tensions between U.S. militarization and world order; (5) The new frontiers of militarization—cyber, space, and multi-domain operations. In doing so, the article highlights the contradiction at the heart of contemporary American strategy: the belief that global peace can be achieved through military supremacy, even though such supremacy increasingly fosters instability.

1) The Strategic and Ideological Roots of American Militarism

To fully grasp the structural nature of American militarism, it is necessary to trace its ideological and strategic foundations across different historical and political contexts. This trajectory begins with the cultural and doctrinal roots that made military power a central pillar of U.S. identity, before moving through the illusion of unipolar dominance in the post-Cold War era, the quagmire of the “forever wars,” and finally the persistence of militarism in the contemporary strategic posture under the Biden administration. Each of these dimensions illustrates not only the continuity of military primacy in U.S. foreign policy, but also the recurring paradoxes and contradictions that have shaped its global projection of power.

American militarism is not simply the result of post-9/11 counterterrorism or great power rivalry. It is deeply embedded in the country’s history and strategic culture. From the doctrine of Manifest Destiny in the 19th century to the Cold War containment strategy, the United States has consistently relied on military force as a central instrument of its rise. As Bacevich (2005) argues, the U.S. has developed a form of “military absolutism,” where force is not merely an option but often the preferred tool of policy. The tendency to resort to arms has been reinforced by the cultural glorification of the military in American political discourse, the influence of the military-industrial complex (Eisenhower, 1961), and the bipartisan consensus that U.S. leadership requires military dominance.

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The collapse of the Soviet Union fostered the belief that American power could be perpetuated indefinitely through its military advantage. Charles Krauthammer's notion of the "unipolar moment" (1990) reflected a conviction that the U.S. had achieved a hegemonic status that would remain unchallenged. This confidence translated into an interventionist strategy: military actions in the Balkans (Bosnia, Kosovo), the Middle East (Iraq, Afghanistan), and North Africa (Libya) reinforced the perception that the U.S. was the "indispensable nation" (Albright, 1998). However, these interventions often produced destabilization rather than peace, fueling criticisms of an over-militarized foreign policy (Miller, 2019).

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq epitomized this paradox. Despite overwhelming military superiority, the U.S. was unable to achieve decisive political outcomes. The Afghan conflict, the longest in American history, ended in 2021 with a chaotic withdrawal that symbolized the limits of militarism. Similarly, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, justified in the name of disarmament and democratization, generated chaos, sectarian conflict, and the rise of ISIS (Byman, 2011). These "forever wars" revealed the structural limits of military power: it can topple regimes but not easily rebuild states or reconcile societies. As Stephen Walt (2018) has underlined, American strategy has often confused the capacity to destroy with the capacity to create order.

Even after the failures of Iraq and Afghanistan, militarism remains a defining feature of U.S. policy. President Biden's 2022 National Security Strategy emphasizes the need to "out-compete China and contain Russia," with the Pentagon at the core of this competition. While diplomacy is rhetorically highlighted, the reality is that U.S. strategy continues to prioritize forward deployment, modernization of nuclear forces, and the expansion of alliances (NATO, AUKUS, Quad). Thus, far from marking a rupture, the Biden administration illustrates the continuity of militarism as a structural element of American power. As Posen (2014) argues, Washington remains trapped in a grand strategy of "liberal hegemony," in which military force is viewed as the ultimate guarantor of order, despite its destabilizing consequences.

The historical trajectory of American militarism reveals a pattern of continuity that transcends administrations and geopolitical shifts. From the ideological underpinnings of Manifest Destiny to the "forever wars" of the 21st century, the reliance on military force has remained a structural feature of U.S. power. Yet, if Part I has shown the roots and persistence of this militarized tradition, the contemporary era adds new layers of complexity. The global network of U.S. bases, the entrenchment of the military-industrial complex, and the framing of great power rivalry with China and Russia have institutionalized militarism in unprecedented ways. It is to these dynamics of global militarization and the expanding reach of U.S. military presence that the next section now turns.

2) The Global Network of U.S. Bases and the Geography of Power

If American militarism is rooted in history and ideology, its most tangible manifestation lies in the global geography of U.S. power. Unlike traditional empires, Washington's reach does not rely on territorial conquest but on an unparalleled network of overseas military bases. This "empire of bases" provides the United States with the ability to project force, sustain operations, and influence political outcomes across every region of the globe. To understand the centrality of this system, it is essential to examine its scope, strategic logic, dual functions of reassurance and coercion, the controversies it generates, and its potential reconfiguration in an era of shifting warfare and geopolitics.

One of the most distinctive features of American military power is its global network of installations. Chalmers Johnson (2004) famously described it as an "empire of bases"—a unique infrastructure that allows the United States to project power instantaneously across the globe. Unlike previous empires, whose control relied on colonies or territorial possessions, the U.S. exercises influence through a dense web of military facilities embedded in allied or dependent states. The U.S. maintains approximately 750 military bases in over 80 countries, ranging from small logistics hubs to massive installations like Ramstein in Germany, Camp Humphreys in South Korea, and Al Udeid in Qatar (IISS, 2024). These bases host tens of thousands of personnel, stockpiles of equipment, and advanced command-and-control infrastructure. They constitute what David Vine (2015) calls the "backbone of global hegemony."

The geography of U.S. bases reflects strategic priorities. In Europe, the network initially designed to deter the Soviet

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Union now serves to contain Russia, reinforce NATO's eastern flank, and sustain rapid deployments. The expansion of U.S. forces in Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states after the war in Ukraine illustrates this shift. In Asia, bases in Japan, South Korea, Guam, and increasingly in the Philippines underpin the policy of "integrated deterrence" aimed at counterbalancing China. Washington's emphasis on the Indo-Pacific, codified in the 2022 National Defense Strategy, illustrates a long-term pivot of military attention eastward. In the Middle East, installations in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar provide logistical support for operations and guarantee control of strategic chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz. Although the U.S. has reduced its permanent presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, the region remains central to energy security and counterterrorism missions.

Finally, in Africa, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) relies on a lighter footprint, with drone bases in Djibouti (Camp Lemonnier) and Niger (Agadez), reflecting a strategy of flexible presence adapted to counterterrorism and monitoring great-power competition on the continent (Watts, 2021). These installations fulfill a dual function: they reassure allies while signaling coercive capacity to adversaries. For allies such as South Korea, Germany, or Poland, the permanent presence of U.S. forces represents a tangible security guarantee, reinforcing the credibility of defense commitments. At the same time, for rivals like China, Russia, or Iran, these bases are visible reminders of American power projection, often interpreted as encirclement or strategic pressure. This duality creates a paradox. Bases intended to stabilize alliances can simultaneously destabilize regional relations by heightening the security dilemma. For instance, the reinforcement of NATO forces in Eastern Europe, meant to deter Russia, is perceived in Moscow as evidence of Western aggression—thus fueling the very confrontation it seeks to contain (Mearsheimer, 2022).

The "empire of bases" also entails enormous financial and political costs. According to the Congressional Research Service (2023), maintaining overseas facilities costs tens of billions of dollars annually, representing a significant portion of Pentagon expenditures. Domestically, critics argue that this spending diverts resources from social priorities, while internationally, U.S. bases have sparked controversies over sovereignty, environmental damage, and social tensions with host populations. Movements opposing U.S. bases have emerged in Okinawa (Japan), South Korea, and Italy, where local communities denounce noise, accidents, crimes, and the perception of being occupied. These protests highlight the fragility of host-nation consent, which is essential for sustaining the basing network.

The evolution of warfare and geopolitics may lead to a reconfiguration of this network. The rise of long-range precision weapons, cyberattacks, and anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities makes large permanent bases vulnerable. In response, the Pentagon is experimenting with "lily pad" bases—smaller, more flexible, and dispersed installations designed for rapid deployment (Cancian, CSIS, 2022). At the same time, great-power competition suggests that the U.S. will not reduce but rather adapt its global presence. The Indo-Pacific, Eastern Europe, and the Arctic are likely to become the priority theaters of this evolving geography of military power. Taken together, the global basing system illustrates how U.S. militarism is not merely an ideological choice but an infrastructural reality that shapes world politics on a daily basis. However, bases alone do not explain the persistence of militarization. To grasp the full picture, one must turn to the domestic drivers that entrench this system—above all, the political economy of defense spending and the influence of the military-industrial complex, which form the backbone of America's militarized grand strategy.

3) The Militarization of U.S. Foreign Policy

If the global network of bases illustrates the outward geography of American power, the militarization of U.S. foreign policy reveals its inner logic. Over time, diplomacy and development have been increasingly subordinated to military priorities, while security concerns have become the dominant lens through which Washington interprets international affairs. This evolution reflects not only institutional dynamics in Washington but also the influence of the defense industry, the logic of counterterrorism, and the securitization of issues that traditionally belonged to the civilian sphere.

A defining feature of U.S. foreign policy is the preeminence of the Department of Defense over civilian institutions. While the State Department and USAID are tasked with diplomacy and development, they remain underfunded compared to the Pentagon, whose budget in 2023 exceeded \$860 billion (SIPRI 2024). This imbalance has produced what analysts call a "militarization of diplomacy": crises are increasingly managed through military

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channels, while civilian tools of conflict prevention and resolution are marginalized (Gowan, 2021). The structure of U.S. combatant commands illustrates this phenomenon. Commands such as CENTCOM (Middle East), AFRICOM (Africa), and INDOPACOM (Indo-Pacific) function as regional “proconsuls,” exercising influence that often exceeds that of ambassadors. The Pentagon has thus become not only the executor but also the architect of American global strategy.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 accelerated this militarization. The “War on Terror” turned into an open-ended global campaign, legitimizing the deployment of U.S. forces in regions far beyond the Middle East. Military tools became the default instruments of counterterrorism, from drone strikes in Yemen and Somalia to special operations across Africa and Asia. Although the Biden administration declared the “end of the era of large-scale counterinsurgency,” the militarized logic persists. The 2022 *National Defense Strategy* shifts the focus from terrorism to great-power competition, primarily with China and Russia. Yet the strategic reflex remains the same: global challenges—whether cyber, climate, or technological—are increasingly framed in military terms, reinforcing the Pentagon’s primacy.

Another expression of militarization is the normalization of interventionism. Since 1945, the U.S. has intervened militarily abroad more than 200 times (Kushi & Toft, 2022). These interventions, ranging from covert operations to full-scale wars, reflect a belief that U.S. security is inseparable from shaping political orders abroad. Even in regions where direct interests are limited, military presence becomes an end in itself—preserving credibility, deterring rivals, or maintaining access to resources. The wars in Iraq and Libya, as well as the continuing strikes in Syria, illustrate this logic of perpetual engagement. What emerges is not a strategy of selective defense but of proactive management of world order through force.

The militarization of foreign policy is also evident in the growing reliance on drones and special forces. Between 2001 and 2020, U.S. drone strikes killed thousands of suspected militants in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia (Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2021). While reducing risks for U.S. troops, this strategy blurred the line between war and peace, creating what Derek Gregory (2011) calls “everywhere war.” Simultaneously, the role of U.S. Special Operations Forces has expanded dramatically: by 2022, they were deployed in over 70 countries, conducting missions from training to direct action (Nagl & Burton, 2022). These trends reinforce a covert militarization of foreign policy, in which war becomes permanent, dispersed, and normalized.

The dominance of military instruments has profound implications. First, it undermines diplomacy: adversaries and partners alike perceive U.S. policy as primarily coercive. Second, it contributes to cycles of instability: interventions intended to neutralize threats often generate new ones, as seen in the emergence of ISIS after the Iraq invasion. Third, it erodes the normative legitimacy of the U.S.: civilian casualties from drone strikes, indefinite detentions at Guantánamo, and unilateral interventions weaken the credibility of American claims to defend a “rules-based order.” In short, the militarization of foreign policy transforms the U.S. into what Michael Mann (2003) called an “incoherent empire”: unmatched in military capacity, but increasingly unable to convert force into durable political outcomes. The militarization of U.S. foreign policy thus highlights a deeper paradox: while Washington presents itself as a defender of liberal international order, its reliance on military instruments often destabilizes that very order. To understand how this paradox plays out in practice, the next section turns to the regional theaters where American militarism is most visible—Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa—each offering a laboratory of both power projection and unintended consequences.

4) Militarization, World Order, and Strategic Backlash

Having explored the roots of militarism, its infrastructural reach, and its penetration of U.S. foreign policy, the final step is to assess its global repercussions. American militarization does not operate in a vacuum: it shapes, and is shaped by, the international order. While Washington frames its military posture as a guarantor of stability and liberal values, its reliance on force often generates resistance, rivalries, and unintended consequences that weaken its own legitimacy. To grasp this dynamic, it is necessary to examine how militarism affects world order, fuels strategic backlash from adversaries, complicates alliances, and interacts with emerging multipolarity.

The U.S. military presence is officially justified as a stabilizing factor, guaranteeing deterrence and protecting the so-

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called rules-based international order. Yet, in practice, this posture often fuels the security dilemma: the very deployments meant to reassure allies are perceived by rivals as offensive threats. For example, NATO's expansion eastward and the build-up of U.S. forces in Eastern Europe—especially after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine—are seen in Moscow as evidence of Western encirclement. This dynamic deepens confrontations, illustrating John Mearsheimer's thesis in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2022) that unchecked power projection fosters insecurity rather than peace. Similarly, in Asia, the strengthening of U.S. alliances and the creation of security partnerships like AUKUS or the Quad are interpreted by Beijing as containment strategies. This perception contributes to an accelerating arms race, from hypersonic weapons to naval expansion, raising the risks of miscalculation in the South China Sea or around Taiwan.

The militarization of U.S. foreign policy has encouraged the emergence of balancing coalitions. Russia and China, despite historical mistrust, have intensified their strategic partnership as a counterweight to American influence, coordinating military exercises and expanding energy and defense cooperation. Regional powers such as Iran, North Korea, and even Turkey adopt strategies of asymmetric balancing, relying on missiles, drones, or hybrid warfare to offset U.S. superiority. This resistance illustrates the paradox of U.S. hegemony: overwhelming military power generates both dependence (among allies) and defiance (among adversaries). Instead of consolidating a unipolar order, militarization accelerates a transition toward multipolarity, where rival powers contest U.S. dominance across multiple domains.

Another consequence of U.S. militarization is the erosion of legitimacy. While Washington frames its interventions as defending democracy and human rights, many international observers view them as unilateral or selective. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, undertaken without UN approval, remains a stark example of how the use of force undermines the very norms the U.S. claims to uphold. Civilian casualties from drone strikes, indefinite detentions, and the perception of double standards—defending international law against adversaries while exempting allies—further weaken U.S. credibility. According to a 2023 Pew Research Center survey, trust in the U.S. as a global leader remains high in some allied countries but has declined significantly in parts of the Global South, where Washington is seen as imposing rather than upholding rules.

By prioritizing unilateral military solutions, the U.S. also weakens multilateral institutions. During the Cold War, American leadership was partly exercised through institutions like the UN, NATO, and the Bretton Woods system. Today, however, militarized approaches often bypass these frameworks, sidelining diplomacy and eroding collective legitimacy. For instance, the intervention in Libya in 2011, initially authorized by the UN Security Council, quickly exceeded its mandate of civilian protection and became a regime-change operation—provoking long-term instability and skepticism toward Western interventions. Similarly, drone campaigns in countries such as Pakistan or Somalia often occur without the consent of host governments, undermining sovereignty and the credibility of international law.

Militarization also produces unintended consequences among allies. While many states rely on U.S. security guarantees, they increasingly question Washington's reliability and motives. The chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 raised doubts in European capitals about America's commitment, fueling debates on European "strategic autonomy." At the same time, adversaries interpret U.S. militarization as justification for accelerating their own military programs. Iran deepens its missile and drone capabilities, North Korea continues nuclear testing, and China modernizes its nuclear arsenal—developments that Washington's posture was meant to deter but instead seems to encourage.

5) The New Frontiers of Militarization: Cyber, Space, and Multi-Domain Operations

While much of U.S. militarism has historically relied on conventional power projection and global basing, the future of warfare is rapidly shifting toward new domains. Cyber operations, space militarization, and integrated multi-domain warfare represent the cutting edge of American strategic thinking. These emerging frontiers extend militarization beyond traditional battlefields, embedding it in digital infrastructures, orbital environments, and interconnected command systems. To grasp the transformation, it is essential to explore how these domains are being militarized, the opportunities they provide, and the risks they introduce for global security and stability.

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U.S. military power is no longer confined to land, sea, and air. The emergence of cyber and space domains has expanded the geography of conflict into new frontiers. The Pentagon now conceptualizes war as multi-domain operations (MDOs)—the seamless integration of operations across conventional and novel theaters. This doctrinal evolution reflects both technological advances and the recognition that great-power rivalry now extends beyond physical battlefields. The United States has invested massively in cyber capabilities, designating cyberspace as a “domain of warfare” in 2010. U.S. Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM) conducts both defensive and offensive missions, ranging from protecting critical infrastructure to executing “persistent engagement” operations against adversaries.

Reports suggest that U.S. cyber operations have targeted Russian disinformation campaigns, Iranian infrastructure, and Chinese espionage networks (Healey, 2022). Yet the offensive use of cyber tools raises concerns about escalation and attribution: a cyber strike can provoke retaliation in unpredictable ways, blurring the boundary between war and peace. Moreover, the centrality of American tech giants—Microsoft, Google, Amazon—in defense contracts (notably the \$9 billion *Joint Warfighting Cloud Capability*) reveals the deep entanglement between Silicon Valley and the Pentagon. This fusion of military and digital power extends U.S. influence but also exposes vulnerabilities, as dependence on private actors introduces questions of accountability and resilience.

The creation of the U.S. Space Force in 2019 formalized the militarization of outer space. Washington views satellites as critical to communications, navigation, intelligence, and targeting. Protecting these assets is now considered a priority, especially given China’s and Russia’s demonstrated anti-satellite capabilities. The deployment of space-based sensors, missile defense systems, and plans for orbital logistics reflect a strategy of dominance rather than mere deterrence. However, the absence of robust international norms on space militarization increases the risk of an arms race in orbit. A single incident—such as the destruction of a satellite—could generate cascading debris and destabilize global infrastructure.

Another frontier is the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into military operations. The U.S. Department of Defense’s Joint Artificial Intelligence Center (JAIC) coordinates projects ranging from predictive logistics to autonomous weapons systems. The goal is to accelerate decision-making and gain superiority in what military theorists call the “OODA loop” (observe–orient–decide–act). Programs such as Project Maven, designed to analyze drone footage using AI, exemplify this shift. Yet ethical and strategic concerns abound: the delegation of lethal decisions to algorithms raises profound questions of accountability, while adversaries’ rapid progress in AI intensifies the race. As scholars like Paul Scharre (2018) warn, the diffusion of AI risks lowering the threshold for conflict by making war faster, more automated, and potentially less controllable.

The expansion into cyber, space, and AI illustrates the paradox of American militarization: innovations designed to ensure superiority can generate new insecurities. U.S. dominance in digital and space infrastructures provokes rivals to accelerate their own programs, from China’s BeiDou navigation system to Russia’s cyber militias. Instead of consolidating hegemony, technological militarization multiplies the arenas of confrontation, making escalation more difficult to control. In this sense, the U.S. pursuit of multi-domain dominance reinforces the strategic paradox: by seeking security through expansion of military power into every domain, Washington risks creating an increasingly unstable and fragmented world order. The expansion of militarization into cyber, space, and multi-domain warfare demonstrates that American strategic culture is not retreating from militarism but reinventing it. These innovations may strengthen U.S. dominance in the short term, but they also risk escalating arms races, undermining norms, and entrenching a cycle of insecurity at the global level.

Conclusion: The Strategic Paradox of U.S. Military Power

The United States remains the world’s preeminent military power, with a global network of bases, unmatched technological capabilities, and a defense budget larger than those of the next ten countries combined. This unparalleled capacity allows Washington to project force rapidly, reassure allies, and deter adversaries across multiple continents. Yet, the very foundations of American security strategy reveal a deep paradox: the more the U.S. relies on militarization to shape world order, the more it generates instability, backlash, and contestation.

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The militarization of U.S. foreign policy—manifest in the dominance of the Pentagon, the normalization of interventionism, and the expansion into new domains such as cyber and space—has produced unintended consequences. Allies oscillate between dependence and mistrust, adversaries respond with asymmetric strategies, and global institutions are weakened. Instead of consolidating a stable liberal order, the U.S. often accelerates multipolar fragmentation, as rising powers challenge its dominance in increasingly diverse arenas. The reliance on military solutions undermines diplomacy and erodes legitimacy. Civilian casualties, selective interventions, and the perception of double standards weaken U.S. credibility, especially in the Global South. As Washington continues to frame challenges through the prism of security, it risks perpetuating cycles of escalation and diminishing its ability to achieve durable political outcomes.

Looking ahead, the paradox of American power lies in its dual identity: an indispensable guarantor of global security for some, but also a destabilizing hegemon for others. The future of world order will depend not only on the U.S.'s capacity to maintain its military superiority but also on its willingness to rebalance its strategy—privileging diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, and non-military instruments of power. Without such recalibration, the United States may find that its unparalleled military strength, rather than ensuring peace, becomes a central driver of global insecurity. As the international system shifts toward multipolarity, the U.S. faces a critical choice: continue on a path of militarization that risks deepening the paradox, or embrace a more holistic conception of power that aligns military capacity with political legitimacy. Only the latter offers the prospect of transforming America's military might from a source of instability into a foundation for a more durable and inclusive peace.

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