As Syria burns, China rises, and North Korea threatens with its nuclear arsenal, U.S. national security experts have been forced to lurch from crisis to crisis, without any time to step back and look at America’s role in the global world order. In his new book, *Preventive Engagement*, Council on Foreign Relations fellow Paul Stares identifies that the U.S. government’s lack of long-term strategy has become a crisis of its own. The United States created the global world order, but unless American foreign policy shifts away from ad hoc crisis management, it will cede its leadership role to another more strategic nation.

To correct current course, Stares argues that the United States needs a new grand strategy, which he calls preventive engagement. Preventive engagement, in his mind, follows an approach pioneered by health providers to prevent, diagnose, and treat disease. Stares outlines preventive engagement’s three-pronged approach: conflict risk reduction (the equivalent of dietary and lifestyle guidelines), deliberate measures to defuse an extant dispute (early preventive medical treatment), and conflict mitigation measures (emergency care). In this articulation, Stares is at his strongest — the doctrine he sketches is philosophically sound, relevantly forward-looking, and well-matched to an evolving and important set of problems.

Book Review

*Preventive Engagement: How America Can Avoid War, Stay Strong, and Keep the Peace*  

Drawing the Sting:  
The Logic of Preventive Engagement

Book Review by Ellen Chapin

*Preventive Engagement: How America Can Avoid War, Stay Strong, and Keep the Peace*  
Stares is quick to point out that his case is separate and distinct from other common arguments for reform of U.S. grand strategy, which he calls “supply-side” changes. He oversimplifies when he says that most policymakers call for the United States to either engage increasingly in global conflict or withdraw further. Ideologically, he recognizes that both camps have valid strengths and weaknesses, but also points out that they do not actually address the crux of the United States’ foreign policy problems: the demand side.

Both existing arguments “essentially hinge on whether the United States should provide more or less power...to the maintenance of international order.” Instead, Stares argues that the United States should modulate its engagement according to demand, investing more where investment is most effective in averting conflict before it starts. Reactivity paves the path to crisis management, which is the antithesis of Stares’ broader framework.

While the core of Stares’ book is in his theory, he also integrates several case studies. He creates three tiers of crises, based on their priority and likelihood. Alarming but appropriately, “renewed Korean war” is both high priority and high likelihood. Here, Stares does his best to be granular in his recommendations, highlighting the need for U.S. and Republic of Korea (ROK) defensive posturing, but also diplomatic efforts to lessen tensions on the peninsula. The risk of such recommendations, especially in such a quickly changing crisis, is that they may be overcome by events. In spring 2018, tensions with nuclear-armed North Korea may well have progressed beyond the point of prevention à la Stares. If this is the case, then Stares’ framework risks becoming the optimal approach for all national security issues, except the important ones.

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Having spent his entire career as an academic, Stares is adept at navigating the conceptual contours of the national security landscape and mapping his theory onto its rockiest challenges. However, as an academic, Stares also appears to have an unwavering optimism for his strategy’s success, even in contexts where that success is unlikely, like under the Trump administration. In discussing the book’s release at the Council on Foreign Relations, Stares cited his meetings at the Pentagon as the possible beginnings of his strategy’s spread. However, focused as it is on avoiding active war, preventive engagement would need buy-in from several other agencies — in-roads at the Pentagon are, at most, just a start.
The United States cannot hope to continue as a world leader without clarifying its path – for its citizens, for its soldiers, and for its future.

Stares recognizes that a grand strategy does not require specific operational marching orders, but he strives to provide concrete steps that the U.S. foreign policy machine can take to work towards preventive engagement. In his conclusion, he discusses “reorienting the U.S. bureaucracy,” relying heavily on the direction of the National Security Council. This approach has risks. The NSC has risen to extraordinary size and prestige in recent decades — though it may have declined slightly under the Trump administration. Inflating it further could make the NSC even more unwieldy and perhaps entirely unmanageable for future Presidents.

Stares’ argument is decidedly not groundbreaking: his practical approach to foreign policy recognizes that the United States is undoubtedly better when it has a long-term plan. However, I worry that the time for preventive engagement has come and gone. As Stares identifies, transitions of power create a period of uncertainty and change as new leaders seek to find their footing in the existing political landscape. So, the perfect time to begin to look at a reformation of strategy would be immediately following an election, especially if the incoming and outgoing administrations are from the same party (or, at minimum, they share tenets of morality and vision for the nation’s future).

If Hilary Clinton had won the election, I suspect we might have seen a move toward an approach like Stares’ that, at a minimum, formulates a clearer grand strategy. If two administrations are able to cooperate in their transition of power, they may be able to set a long-term foreign agenda with both the institutional memory of the outgoing administration and the long-term vision of the incoming administration. However, if China becomes the unparalleled world power before such a time, the United States may need to completely reimagine its policies in all spheres. At minimum, Stares’ work should sound the alarm for policymakers. The United States cannot hope to continue as a world leader without clarifying its path – for its citizens, for its soldiers, and for its future.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ellen Chapin is a second-year Master’s student at the Yale Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, where she focuses on the intersection of counterterrorism and data analysis. This past summer, she served as a Rosenthal Fellow at West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center, researching and publishing on Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, and other terrorism beyond the Islamic State’s caliphate. Next year, she will serve as General Stanley McChrystal’s speechwriter and begin pursuing her PhD.