

ON THE SUSTAINABILITY OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY: A CASE FOR DOING LESS

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The tendency of the Washington establishment to see the election of Donald Trump as the cause of a crisis in American foreign policy and the global order it built is wrong. Rather, the election of Trump in 2016 was more a symptom of the recent failures of America's policy abroad and a harbinger of change than the cause of all our contemporary woes.¹ American voters, disillusioned with the promises of liberal hegemony, sent a signal to the U.S. foreign policy establishment, and it took the form of the election of the forty-fifth President of the United States. The constituencies on which Trump relied to win the White House—blue-collar Midwesterners, rural voters, and Sun Belt suburbanites—are among those who have been most spurned by the failures of past policy.² And while it is far too bold to claim that these voters cast their ballots with foreign policy first in mind, it is undeniable that then-candidate Trump was able to make a clear case for fundamental change in the way the United States interacts with the world on issues from international trade, to China, NATO, and endless war in the Middle East.³

But despite Trump's promise to upend conventional U.S. foreign policy, his own policy looks strikingly similar to that which he assailed throughout the campaign. Instead of bringing

¹ For one treatment of Donald Trump as a symptom of a crisis in the existing order rather than a cause, see Ian Bremmer, "We're in a Geopolitical Recession. Trump Isn't the Cause, He's a Symptom," *Washington Post*, September 10, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/09/10/were-geopolitical-recession-trump-isnt-cause-hes-symptom/>. For a take on whether the order ever existed as it is imagined, see Paul Staniland, "Misreading the 'Liberal Order': Why We Need New Thinking in American Foreign Policy," *Lawfare*, July 29, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/misreading-liberal-order-why-we-need-new-thinking-american-foreign-policy>.

² For an explication of the gap between voter preferences and the foreign policy consensus, see John Halpin, et al., "America Adrift," *Center for American Progress*, May 5, 2019, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/05/05/469218/america-adrift/>. Another useful example is to look at who has fought America's wars of late, on this see Rosa Brooks, "Civil Military Paradoxes," in Kori Schake and Jim Mattis (eds.), *Warriors & Citizens: American Views of Our Military* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2016): 21-68.

³ For a good overview of Trump's indictment of U.S. foreign policy during the 2016 campaign, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018), 6-12.

troops home, he has likened their role to that of neo-imperial stormtroopers with tasks like protecting Middle Eastern oilfields.⁴ Additionally, he has undergone a remarkable evolution on the utility of NATO, which he once called “obsolete” but to which he now appears fully committed.⁵ Whether this reflects Trump’s being constrained by the immense power of ‘the Blob’ or a coming-to-terms with the complex realities of governing, it is true that Trump has found himself (perhaps unwittingly) exercising the same worn methods of advancing American primacy, except that he does so incoherently and rather incompetently.

As a result, Trump has given restraint a bad name—one from which it may not recover in the near future. Much to the chagrin of scholars and activists from across the political spectrum who have advocated for prudence in American grand strategy, a foreign policy of doing less is likely to be conflated with a Trumpian policy unmoored by any sort of coherent strategy or world-view yet branded as “realist” by its opponents.⁶ Stephen Walt notes that this issue existed long before Trump, remarking of this humbler vision that its most visible proponents have been outliers within the American political establishment, but the directionless foreign policy of the Trump administration might be the ultimate punt to Team Liberal Hegemony—who has been known to run out the clock.⁷ So, if the election of Donald Trump was a reaction to a broken system, but the people who put him in power now think they have seen the alternative and are thoroughly unimpressed, American foreign policy come January 2021 might, to paraphrase Yeats’ “The Second Coming,” slouch toward the status quo ante to be reborn. This would not, however, address the core reality that our current approach is unsustainable.

⁴ Michael Crowley, “‘Keep the Oil’: Trump Revives Charged Slogan for New Syria Troop Mission,” *New York Times*, October 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/26/us/politics/trump-syria-oil-fields.html>.

⁵ Alex Ward, “Trump Just Committed to NATO’s Article 5. Finally,” *Vox*, June 9, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/6/9/15772292/trump-article-5-nato-commit>.

⁶ For the seminal academic treatment of a grand strategy of restraint, see Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014). Also, Joseph M. Parent and Paul K. MacDonald, “The Wisdom of Retrenchment,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 6 (November/December 2011): 32-47.

⁷ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 289-290.

Because the United States cannot alter the primordial tide of international politics, its best bet would be to reimagine its own role in the world.⁸ This is a meaningful enough reason to do less, and it is in the national interest for the United States to do so gracefully rather than crash out against its own will.⁹ A new American foreign policy should first appreciate that the United States possesses tremendous advantages—the providential boon of its geography among them—that make it remarkably safe and prosperous. From there, the United States should then acknowledge that the hubris that has characterized American strategy since the end of the Cold War has only made it less safe and generated a strong case for balancing against American power.¹⁰

A reevaluation of American foreign policy should start by taking stock of its commitments and demanding that allies and partners alike do more for their own security. While this has been a popular refrain by leaders for years, the American experience has proven that the only true catalyst for inspiring others to do more is to muster the will to pack up and come home.¹¹ Thus, the United States should renegotiate its alliances to ensure its prosperous friends are responsible for their own defense and begin a process of reducing its military footprint abroad, especially in regions of minimum strategic significance and where serious threats remain muted.¹²

In a pandemic-stricken world, the need to do so has never been clearer. With American power put to the test on a scale not witnessed in decades and death tolls continuing to rise, it seems American security would have been better served by producing fewer F-35s and many more N95s

⁸ The debates over the inevitability of American relative decline vary in both kind and degree, for different acknowledgments of American decline see Parent and MacDonald, “The Wisdom of Retrenchment” and Christopher Layne, “The End of Pax Americana: How Western Decline Became Inevitable,” *The Atlantic*, April 26, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/04/the-end-of-pax-americana-how-western-decline-became-inevitable/256388/>.

⁹ On managing a ‘graceful’ decline, see Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, “Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment,” *International Security* 35, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 7-44.

¹⁰ Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: Norton, 2005).

¹¹ Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, “Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security* 21, no. 4 (Spring 1997): 5-48.

¹² For a practical explication of such a reduction, see Jasen J. Castillo, “Passing the Torch: Criteria for Implementing a Strategy of Offshore Balancing,” *New Voices in Grand Strategy* (Washington DC: Center for New American Security, 2019).

during peacetime. This proposed process of gradual disengagement may be the only way to save the remnants of the American-led order lest it crumble from the core. This same order has largely served U.S. interests since 1945, but under current circumstances it undoubtedly needs a serious makeover. If the United States wishes to husband its power and prosperity for a new era, it will require a radical effort to develop a strategy that is defined by doing less, not more.

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