



## Realism Restrained: The Washington Playbook Strikes Back

Emma Ashford

May 24, 2016

In Washington, D.C., where calls for the United States to do more abroad are incessant — whether in Syria, Libya, Ukraine, or the South China Sea — it can be unexpected and even jarring to hear speakers say that America should do less. So last week's Advancing American Security conference, hosted by the Charles Koch Institute, provided an interesting counterpoint, as many of the panelists advocated a more realist or restrained approach to foreign policy. In doing so, they raised ideas that rarely form a part of what President Obama terms the "Washington Playbook." As several speakers pointed out, public opinion, and even electoral politics, appear to be shifting in a more restrained direction. If Washington's foreign policy community doesn't want to become an unrepresentative bubble, we must make more of an effort to include realist voices in the policy conversation.

Wednesday's conference didn't have the narrow focus typical of many think tank events (i.e., how to take Mosul, how to deal with Libya, or how to resolve the Russia-Ukraine crisis). Instead, panelists throughout the day took a step back to debate questions rarely discussed in the age of the 24-hour news cycle: Has American foreign policy, viewed broadly over the last 25 years, been effective? And should today's foreign policy status quo be altered? Certainly, some of the answers panelists proposed were relatively radical, such as Andrew Bacevich's contention that the United States should withdraw from NATO and turn European defense over to Europeans, an idea likely to provoke hyperventilation in Washington's hallways of power.

But other ideas were close to common sense, such as the notion that military force isn't always the best approach to global crises. Though it's not uncommon to hear this statement, even from the White House, America's leaders still tend to treat military power as the tool of first resort in practice. Across a dozen presidential primary debates, for example, hopeful Republican candidates advocated the use of force to deal with crises ranging from Ukraine to Syria to North Korea. But as Michael Desch noted at the conference, "We should have a healthy skepticism about the utility of military force."

Indeed, there were a surprising number of points which drew agreement from panelists of all ideological stripes. Throughout the day, various speakers noted the fact that the United States is remarkably safe and secure, a truism that nonetheless flies in the face of popular panicked narrative. Many noted the need for the United States to refocus on problems here at home, particularly aging infrastructure. And while panelists disagreed widely on when the United States should be engaged militarily around the world, even Michael O'Hanlon, perhaps the most hawkish participant, noted that Washington should be selective about where and when military

force is employed. He argued that it is simply not worth it for the United States to fight over the Senkaku Islands or Crimea.

Many panelists expressed doubt about whether it is advisable or even possible for the United States to change the internal security or human rights policies of other states. Though recent U.S. foreign policy failures on this front may not have directly made America itself less safe — thanks to its extremely favorable geopolitical situation — American foreign policy has certainly helped to destabilize other regions. Questions about major risks, threats, failures, and successes likewise provoked unusual answers. Notably, the Islamic State was barely mentioned throughout the day, while the risk that security spirals could lead to great power war, whether with Russia over Ukraine, or with China, received substantial discussion. The strong emphasis on the risks of potential great power conflict was unusual compared to the normal prevalence of terrorism or smaller states like Iran, Syria, and Libya that so often form a disproportionate part of the public discourse on foreign affairs.

More importantly, in highlighting the foreign policy follies of the last decade, many of the event's speakers made a good case for a more restrained foreign policy, whether in the form of offshore balancing, as Stephen Walt advocated, or an even more hands-off approach to the world. The day's final panel, built around the more practical theme of giving advice to the next president, saw several participants argue for some kind of "strategic pause" to allow the new administration to more effectively assess the failures and successes of current policies and make course corrections. In effect, rather than immediately announcing major, possibly irreversible foreign policy decisions immediately upon entering office, a strategic pause would likely see current policies continue for some period, as policymakers examine the trove of data available to the president and decide on long-term strategic approaches.

It is perhaps not surprising that some of the event's speakers — in addition to Washington-based experts from think tanks like the Brookings Institution, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the Cato Institute — were academics from outside the beltway bubble (or, as Ben Rhodes might put it, they are not part of "the blob"). It is common to hear realists criticized for not engaging with the policy process, preferring instead to remain in their ivory towers, but this criticism itself is somewhat inaccurate. A number of the event's restraint-minded academics, including Richard Betts and Michael Desch, have spent time in government, or as in the case of Gian Gentile, in military service. Still others seek to influence the policy process through alternative means.

Despite these attempts at engagement, realist and restraint-oriented perspectives, whether from inside or outside the Beltway, remain a relative rarity in Washington, where broadly interventionist ideas tend to dominate among both Democrats and Republicans. Indeed, last week also saw the release of a report by the Center for a New American Security, co-authored by former officials from both the Obama and Bush administrations, which argued for the extension and expansion of American power and presence around the globe. With the report's 10 signatories dominated by liberal internationalist and neoconservative voices, it is no surprise that it calls for various expansive policies, including a no-fly zone in Syria, a focus on undermining Iran's hegemonic ambitions, providing arms to Ukraine, and a call to "significantly increase U.S. national security and defense spending."

Yet as several speakers at the conference noted, public opinion is actually shifting towards support for a more restrained foreign policy: in a [recent poll](#), only 27% of respondents believed that the United States should take a more active role in world affairs. Though the CNAS report to some extent acknowledges this – noting that “the bipartisan consensus that has long supported America’s engagement with the world is under attack by detractors in both parties” – it does little to address such critiques, focusing instead on the need for further U.S. engagement and leadership. But in turning a blind eye to realist perspectives, Washington’s interventionist community risks becoming entirely divorced from changing opinions outside the Beltway.

As President Obama’s tenure has made abundantly clear, it is extremely difficult to shift the course of U.S. foreign policy. Obama himself talks like a realist, but has rarely followed through on these ideas or done so unevenly. Though his rhetoric has led other groups of foreign policy thinkers, notably neoconservatives, to complain of [being marginalized](#) during this administration, their voices remain a major part of the debate, and one that is increasingly dominant inside the beltway. And for every occasion in which Obama successfully pursued a more restrained course — Ukraine, for example — there are cases such as Libya wherein more interventionist tendencies won out. Even in Syria, so often cited as a key example of the [president’s realist thinking](#), what began as an astute hands-off policy degenerated quickly into mission creep, “train-and-equip” programs, and boots on the ground, or as [Jeremy Shapiro describes it](#), “a long, slow ride down a slippery slope towards ever-greater U.S. involvement.”

Obama’s comments notwithstanding, it is remarkable that realism and restraint have become so marginalized in Washington’s policy community since the end of the Cold War. Yet the event served to highlight how valuable these perspectives are. As Obama told [The Atlantic Monthly’s Jeffrey Goldberg](#) recently, “Almost every great world power has succumbed [to overextension].” He continued, “What I think is not smart is the idea that every time there is a problem, we send in our military to impose order. We just can’t do that.” Ultimately, our foreign policy choices matter not just for today, but for America’s future prosperity and security. A more [restrained, realist foreign policy may well be our best option](#). But at the very least, as Wednesday’s event illustrated, Washington’s liberal interventionist consensus has much to gain from including these perspectives in our foreign policy debates. And if they do not, they risk becoming ever more estranged from popular opinion – and from today’s strategic realities.

*Emma Ashford is a Research Fellow in Defense and Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute. Follow her on Twitter: @emmamashford.*