

Is there a new foreign policy consensus forming?

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Recently, the Texas National Security Review published two roundtables on the future of conservative and progressive foreign policy, featuring essays by some of the leading figures on both sides of the debate. While one might expect a vast chasm between these two visions for American foreign policy, what is striking about the roundtable is not the differences but the commonalities that such a range of scholars and analysts from the left and the right share, and the unstated potential for agreement on a number of topics.

Reading through the essays, the possibility emerges for a new post-Donald Trump bipartisan consensus on foreign policy that differs in important ways from previous characterizations of a Washington, D.C. “blob,” particularly with respect to the use of military force and American primacy. And even where expected differences do emerge (progressives emphasizing the need to combat inequality, for example, and conservatives expressing skepticism, if not outright hostility, toward international institutions), certain areas nevertheless lend themselves to bridge-building.

The essays are not some version of neoconservatism meets liberal internationalism reminiscent of the 1999 Kosovo War or the 2003 Iraq War. Rather, they highlight the way in which the so-called blob has either shifted or fractured over the past two decades. Those scholars (and politicians) still fighting the foreign policy establishment over the folly of the Iraq War should take note of the growing belief among many progressives and conservatives that the United States should be engaged in fewer military interventions in the world given the failures in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya.

What is missing from the essays in these roundtables is noticeable: There is very little concrete discussion in either roundtable of the conditions under which the United States should use military force, especially for missions not tied strictly to the national defense, or of the type of trading relationships the United States ought to maintain, beyond general references to free trade or protectionism.

Any serious effort to rebuild a bipartisan foreign policy consensus along new lines will require conservatives and progressives to answer two sets of questions more explicitly. First, with respect to the use of force, how do one’s views of post-Cold War American military interventions affect one’s view of future missions? It’s fairly easy to say the Gulf War was justified, staying out of Rwanda was not, the 2003 Iraq War was a colossal blunder, the mission in Afghanistan should have ended long ago, and Libya was a debacle. But a more difficult case that ought to be revisited is the 1999 Kosovo War: For reasons discussed below, it is hard to

imagine broad support within the U.S. political establishment for a similar mission 20 years later. This reveals the possibilities of a new consensus that reaches less quickly for the use of force than when the United States was at the height of its post-Cold War power.

Second, with respect to trade, progressives and conservatives need to ask themselves whether the United States was correct to sign the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Depending on the answer, how does that guide one's thinking about future trade agreements? Relatedly, for those who promote greater military restraint but are also pro-free trade, how much of a military footprint does the United States need to possess to uphold a global free trade order? While the academic consensus across the political spectrum still seems to support free trade as a general principle (with public opinion following suit), there is strong political sentiment on both sides favoring greater protectionism to address job losses, particularly in the Midwest.

Points of Convergence and Divergence

The greatest point of convergence across these two roundtables is the centrality of democracy and the rule of law. As Brookings Institution scholar Thomas Wright argued in the progressive roundtable,

One of the advantages of a free world strategy is that it is an American strategy, not a partisan one. There is enough flexibility within the concept to allow progressives and conservatives to tailor it for their own goals. A progressive strategy may seek to build a free world that reduces inequality and put some limits on market forces, whereas a conservative strategy may seek to reduce regulations. Reasonable people can differ about the type of free world strategy they want to build.

Both progressives and conservatives writing in these roundtables also support maintaining America's democratic alliances in the face of authoritarian challenges from countries like China and Russia, a point underscored by the recent House of Representatives vote seeking to block a potential Trump withdrawal from NATO. But the fact that there were 22 Republicans who voted "no" on the measure highlights a growing rift on the right. George Mason University scholar Colin Dueck argues in the conservative roundtable that Trump has so far been able to manage this rift due to the combination of anti-alliance presidential rhetoric and pro-alliance administration policy.

Tied to this bipartisan support for alliances — although perhaps a bit surprisingly after decades of an American strategy of military superiority — there appears to be a possible point of convergence on what Victoria University of Wellington academic Van Jackson calls a policy of "military sufficiency," in which allies would take on a greater defense burden in their regions. The essays on the progressive side are more unanimous on the need to reduce military spending, with defense expert Loren DeJonge Schulman of the Center for a New American Security arguing, "Despite the valiant efforts of some individuals, there is no political home for responsible defense debate, oversight, and accountability."

But even amid the discussions of strong defense and occasional support for military superiority in the conservative roundtable, some of these essays exhibit a growing recognition of military limits. George Washington University professor Henry R. Nau writes, “America stands for freedom but not everywhere at once, respecting the limits of public resources and will” — a far cry from President George W. Bush’s declaration in his second inaugural that “it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.” Many progressives would nod approvingly at the Cato Institute’s Emma Ashford’s comment that “Restraint is an approach to the world that is fundamentally internationalist, but that deemphasizes military means of foreign engagement in favor of diplomacy and other tools of statecraft.”

Between the two roundtables, the progressives favor international institutions in a way that conservatives do not (with John Fonte of the Hudson Institute cheering Trump’s rejection of the “false flag of globalism”). However, many conservatives who are pro-free trade could presumably support institutions like the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank to buttress and regulate global financial and trade flows — after all, they have done so in the past. Progressives are focused more on using institutions to address poverty, inequality, and racism at home and abroad, but at least with respect to domestic concerns, neither side can afford to ignore the economic inequalities that have exploded in recent decades. The need to address domestic inequalities is certainly an issue where common ground can emerge, even if differences over specific policy prescriptions would remain.

It would appear that the two sides have markedly different views toward patriotism, but it isn’t clear why that needs to be the case. New America’s Heather Hurlburt writes of “fostering a patriotism in which diverse identities belong and flourish.” This should not be controversial, but we have seen in American politics that it has become so in some quarters, particularly in the ugly sentiments underlying Trump’s fixation on a “wall” on the southern border. Nevertheless, when Fonte talks about “America’s sovereignty and way of life,” this could certainly be consistent with Hurlburt’s notion of a patriotism consisting of diverse identities. After all, what is more patriotic — and dare I say American — than different ethnic, racial, and religious groups coming together to serve their country?

The essays in the progressive foreign policy roundtable place a clear emphasis on reducing economic inequalities at home and abroad. Jackson writes of the need for “a more relaxed attitude toward economic protectionism” when fairness or labor practices require that. Given the stated objectives of Trump voters, at least with respect to domestic inequalities, that position is not one to be found solely on the left. In fact, the politics of the moment suggest much tougher sledding for those who seek to build support for a policy of free trade.

Finally, while the progressive essays unsurprisingly suggest that the left cares about climate change and its connection to national security in a way that the right does not, given the science, the partisan divide will break down over the long run. Although the conservative roundtable contributors did not highlight this as a topic of concern, one can only stay blind to facts for so

long (too long, yes, but not forever). At some point in the future, both sides will have to make the existential threat of climate change a central topic for public policy.

The Use of Force and Trade

It is disappointing that the authors do not write more on the specifics about interventions and trade agreements. After all, these are two of the central issues around which any future bipartisan foreign policy would have to be built. For example, for internationalists who support democracy promotion and human rights, what form should those efforts take? It's easy to argue for more money for the U.S. Agency for International Development (on the progressive side anyway), but where do folks come down on the interventions of the past 25 years?

As noted above, the 1999 Kosovo air campaign might prove the most interesting case for the establishment to revisit as it looks ahead to the future of American foreign policy. Because it ended with NATO victorious and Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic irreversibly weakened, it does not get the same level of attention as the 2003 Iraq War or the 2011 intervention in Libya. But it should. The air campaign was poorly planned: Clinton administration officials believed a few airstrikes were all that would be needed — instead, a 78-day bombing campaign ensued. The decision to avoid going through the United Nations, given the prospect of a Russian and Chinese veto, set a precedent for George W. Bush in Iraq only four years later. Moreover, the conflict had a major negative impact on Russian (and Chinese) views of the United States.

Given the failures of U.S. military interventions in the succeeding years, would broad support on the left and right exist today for such a mission? Would America go for another Kosovo? Doubtful. That is why a new consensus on greater military restraint seems likely. It was easy in 1999 to lack humility regarding America's capabilities to change societies through force; it should be impossible not to possess that humility today. If both progressives and conservatives would hesitate over a Kosovo-type intervention today, in contrast to the pro-intervention sentiment exhibited by liberal hawks and neo-conservatives that built support for the mission 20 years ago, a more restrained American foreign policy might well emerge.

As for trade, despite an academic consensus supporting free trade and polls showing overwhelming support from the American public, in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, politicians are increasingly responding to those who have been most hurt by globalization over the past 25 years, even while the academic consensus continues to favor free trade. The Trans-Pacific Partnership was an enormous achievement, breaking down barriers to trade and enabling the United States to work with 11 other Asia-Pacific nations in the face of increasing Chinese competition. Trump walked away from it upon entering the presidency, but Hillary Clinton also announced opposition to the agreement during her campaign. Now, however, Trump's over-reliance on tariffs that are hurting significant sectors of the population might help swing political sentiment back toward the academic consensus against protectionism even as differences persist over how to structure free trade agreements with sensitivity toward labor and environmental issues.

One of the more interesting questions for those who advocate greater military restraint but support free trade is how much of an American force presence is required to uphold a global free

trade order. The history of British and American efforts to ensure freedom of navigation, in the 19th and 20th centuries, respectively, suggests this remains an important factor in protecting free trade. This will be tested as Chinese military power increases in the Western Pacific, giving Beijing greater ability to threaten the shipping lanes in the South China Sea. China's dependence on trade may lessen the need for a dominant American presence to support freedom of navigation, but those who favor military restraint and free trade will need to address it.

Conclusion

Toward the end of his essay in the conservative roundtable, Dov Zakheim of the Center for Strategic and International Studies writes the following:

There is a conservative middle way, however. It is to remain active in the world without being interventionist or isolationist. It is to maintain and strengthen the alliances that America has created, yet refrain from wanton intervention in the affairs of other nations unless a true genocide — on the order of the Holocaust, Rwanda, or Cambodia — is taking place. It is to continue to participate in the economic and financial organizations that America has also created, and to work in concert with countries that seek to bolster the effectiveness of those organizations in order to confront the countries that would seek to undermine them. Finally, it is to maintain the good relations with America's neighbors that prompted Truman to boast that the United States was fortunate not to have walls along its borders.

Is there anything in this paragraph that any of the authors on the left would disagree with? Progressives might want to see additional sentences on reducing inequalities and combating climate change, but the paragraph itself seems uncontroversial to either side. Importantly, the emphasis in Zakheim's paragraph is quite different than what is typically attributed to the D.C. establishment, which experts like Harvard professor [Stephen Walt](#), University of Chicago professor [John Mearsheimer](#), and former Barack Obama speechwriter [Benjamin Rhodes](#) view as too quick to reach for military solutions to regional conflicts.

Based on the essays in the two roundtables, there is a new consensus emerging among foreign policy thinkers that the United States needs to be much less eager to insert the military into conflict situations — something the [recent commentary](#) on the situation in Venezuela makes clear. This is the basis for a new bipartisan approach to foreign policy that is distinct from the one that existed after the Cold War ended.

The progressive and conservative roundtables delineate well the differences that exist across these communities on issues such as defense spending, sovereignty, climate change, and the need to address global inequalities, poverty, and racism. Common themes from the past, such as support for democracy and alliances, remain important building blocks for bipartisan foreign policy, especially in the face of challenges from China and Russia. But it is also clear that the humility induced by failed military interventions provides a huge opening to those who seek to build a more restrained American attitude toward the use of force than existed at the height of American power two decades ago.

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