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U.S. grand strategy, R.I.P.

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Last week the Center for a New American Security released a compendium titled “New Voices in Grand Strategy,” edited by a whole bunch of smart people at CNAS. As its foreword explains, “The debate over America’s proper role in the world is perhaps wider than at any time in decades.”

This is undeniably true. In response, CNAS “seeks to broaden the existing debate by bringing new voices to the conversation. We have commissioned a series of essays on American grand strategy from a new generation of thinkers, strategists, academics, and policymakers. As will immediately become apparent, their contributions are not bound by the intellectual and strategic strictures of the past.”

By all means, you should check out the essays, which include insights from the likes of Emma Ashford and Rebecca Friedman Lissner. However, I confess to being somewhat dubious about the entire enterprise.

The reason is my latest and last essay in my Season of Doom series. To recap: Essay No. 1 argued that in a polarized era, capital would always swipe right. Essay No. 2 argued that, intentionally or not, the Trump administration was doing a bang-up job of eviscerating the foreign policy bureaucracy. And Essay No. 3 suggested, with just the mildest amount of hyperbole, that the current global political economy bears an awfully strong resemblance to how things looked just before the start of the First World War.

My fourth and last essay drops Tuesday in Foreign Affairs and is cheerfully titled “This Time is Different: Why U.S. Foreign Policy Will Never Recover.” (Even if you’re not a subscriber, this link allow you to access the entire essay for the next month.)

The core arguments:

1. The part that I suspect will thrill critics of the foreign policy community is that the Blob has been enervated: “Foreign policy discourse was the last preserve of bipartisanship, but political polarization has irradiated that marketplace of ideas. Although future presidents will try to restore the classical version of U.S. foreign policy, in all likelihood, it cannot be revived.”

2. Somewhat more significant, contra Adam Tooze, is that the foundations of U.S. power are also disintegrating. Though they are in better shape than the foreign policy debate, “think of the current moment as a game of Jenga in which multiple pieces have been removed but the tower still stands.” Things look fine right now, but the entire edifice is listing and could crumble more quickly than many commentators appreciate.
3. This is exactly the moment when grand strategists should devise new ways to think about America’s role in the world, right? Wrong, because it doesn’t matter! The problem is that “neither [conservatives nor progressives are] really grappling with the end of equilibrium, however. The question is not what U.S. foreign policy can do after Trump. The question is whether there is any viable grand strategy that can endure past an election cycle.”

You’ll have to read the whole thing to see why my emergent attitude toward the grand-strategy debate can be boiled down to #LOLnothingmatters. For now, all I will note is that many of the reasons I am dubious about the viability of any trade deal with China can be generalized, and I don’t think Bernie Sanders’s grand strategy of reducing global income inequality matters all that much (more on that later in the week). For the first time in my lifetime, I doubt the ability of the United States to credibly commit to anything in international affairs.

The good news for readers of Spoiler Alerts: This is the last Season of Doom essay. And to paraphrase a point I make in the essay’s conclusion: It would be delightful if, 10 years from now, critics mocked my misplaced doom and gloom.