

# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

## Build a Better Blob

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When Ben Rhodes, Deputy National Security Adviser to U.S. President Barack Obama, coined the term “the Blob” a few years ago, it was to describe the hawkish Beltway elites whom he blamed for undermining Obama’s foreign policy vision. Since then, the term has taken on a life of its own, appearing in books and articles and spawning a thousand arguments on Twitter. It has become a shorthand for the D.C. foreign policy community—sometimes as a token of pride, more often as an epithet for those who occupied positions of power during some of the United States’ biggest foreign policy debacles since the end of the Cold War.

In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, Hal Brands, Peter Feaver, and William Inboden set out to defend the Blob. Their argument is simple: contrary to what some critics contend, the Blob is not monolithic. Its track record over the last few decades is largely one of success. And to reject the collective wisdom of the Blob, they contend, is to reject expertise—with disastrous consequences, as U.S. President Donald Trump’s amateurish approach to foreign policy has shown. “The Blob is not the problem,” they conclude. “It is the solution.”

They are wrong. For the most part, the Blob clings to a narrow set of views about the United States’ global role and paints a far too rosy picture of the last few decades of American foreign policy. Its outlook, albeit widespread, should not be confused with expertise—but the idea of the Blob has become so slippery as to enable such conflation. For those who truly want to reshape Washington’s overweening and militarized foreign policy, the best approach is not to engage in name-calling but to work to replace the existing foreign policy consensus and its disciples with something better.

### A RIGGED MARKET

The U.S. foreign policy establishment is easy to parody as an out-of-touch cabal, mired in groupthink and determined to thwart those who question mainstream views. As Brands and his co-authors point out, that portrayal is not quite fair. The Blob is by no means monolithic, and even policies with broad support at the time of their inception, such as the Iraq war and NATO expansion in eastern Europe, met with some criticism from inside Washington foreign policy circles.

To argue that the United States has a thriving “marketplace of foreign policy ideas,” however, is a stretch. For many years, the expert consensus in Washington has been a brand of hawkish internationalism that holds that the United States, acting as the world’s police officer, must seek to solve every global problem and that bad outcomes are the result of insufficient U.S.

involvement or “leadership.” Debate occurs, but only within certain bounds: it is perfectly acceptable to argue that NATO expansion was a mistake but anathema to suggest that NATO itself may no longer serve American interests, given that Washington bears an unequal defense burden and could be forced into conflicts on behalf of the alliance’s newer members. One can permissibly debate whether the United States should “negotiate with Iran or squeeze it,” as Brands, Feaver, and Inboden write. But you’re unlikely to receive a warm welcome if you argue that, beyond its potential to develop nuclear weapons, Iran presents no real threat to the United States. Debate raged for years over whether the Obama administration should intervene against the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, but even those opposed to direct military intervention generally supported the provision of arms to rebels or stand-off strikes to deter chemical weapons use. Very few advocated for simply doing nothing. Discussions over the defense budget are equally monotone: in 2016, when the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments asked several think tanks to create their ideal strategies and Pentagon budget proposals, only one suggested a budget smaller than the one the White House proposed. Supporters of the status quo often point to the importance of debate in one breath then decry counterarguments as “isolationist” in the next.

The constraints matter. They have a chilling effect on debate, in part because those who ignore them run the risk of being branded as Trump sympathizers. Who would want to suggest publicly that the United States should try to improve relations with Russia if to do so means to be associated with a racist, misogynistic administration? Dissenters face career costs, too: if debate happens only within certain bounds, young policy scholars—those most likely to embrace new ideas—can find their careers stunted if they step out of line.

## **MISTAKES WERE MADE**

In Brands, Feaver, and Inboden’s view, critics of the Blob understate not only its internal diversity but also its achievements. To hear them tell it, Washington’s grand strategy of engagement since the end of the Cold War has produced stability, peace, and prosperity, occasionally interrupted by “misconceived and mishandled” interventions in Iraq and elsewhere. The chaos engulfing the world today, they argue, is the result of Trump’s abandoning that strategy.

But this picture is misleading at best. The bipartisan consensus on foreign policy that emerged by the end of the twentieth century was no simple continuation of the United States’ successful Cold War strategy. A strategy and force posture that were perfectly reasonable when facing a hostile superpower such as the Soviet Union was entirely out of proportion after that threat had disappeared. Yet Washington used its unchallenged power in the unipolar moment to set off on a series of crusading missions, from “dual containment” in the Middle East to humanitarian interventions in the Balkans and Central Asia, culminating with a literally global counterterrorism campaign. In the process, it squandered much of its military and political primacy.

To describe the United States’ military interventions as mishandled, for example, is to criminally underplay their impact. Take the 2003 war in Iraq, which scrambled the balance of power in the Middle East for a generation and enabled the emergence of the Islamic State, or ISIS. The same

goes for the 2011 “humanitarian” intervention in Libya, which led to a civil war that still rages today and unleashed a tidal wave of small arms across a volatile region. Even the 1998 NATO intervention in Kosovo, relatively uncontroversial by comparison, substantially worsened U.S.-Russian relations and almost brought troops from the two nations to blows.

Some might argue that the Blob has learned its lesson. After all, Washington decided against large-scale ground invasions in Crimea and Syria. But few would have seriously argued that the United States should have gone to war with Russia over Crimea to begin with, while the light-footprint intervention in Syria—often inaccurately described as Obama’s resisting the Blob—was similarly harmful. In one memorable case, Pentagon-trained and CIA-trained rebels ended up fighting each other.

Defenders of the status quo are right to point out that one cannot boil down all of U.S. foreign policy since the Cold War to debacles such as Iraq and Libya. But some less bellicose policies have been just as detrimental. NATO expansion comes to mind. So, too, does American support for the “color revolutions” in eastern Europe and the Caucasus, which did little to promote democracy and much to worsen U.S. relations with Russia and China. Then there are the extraterritorial sanctions that the United States has imposed on Iran, North Korea, Russia, and others and that have pushed even close allies to try to shield their companies or decouple from the dollar. Critics may argue that only Trump’s incompetence has pushed allies to this extreme, but his administration is using tools popularized and perfected during the Bush and Obama years.

The notion that American withdrawal from global leadership is the real culprit behind these failures—that the world would be a better place if the United States just leaned in more—doesn’t pass the sniff test. There are now as many as 80,000 U.S. troops in the Middle East, compared with around 20,000 in the mid-1990s. U.S. forces overseas still number almost 230,000, compared to 300,000 during the last year of the Cold War. American troops are engaged in combat in at least 14 countries, with regular U.S. air or drone strikes in seven others. Defense spending in 2019 was about 3.4 percent of GDP; most other advanced industrialized democracies spend less than 2.0 percent of GDP. To call this disengagement is laughable.

Ultimately, Brands and his co-authors conclude, thanks to liberal internationalism, the “long peace continued” and the world has remained on a “generally positive track.” They may be right that alternative strategies would have done no better; counterfactuals are impossible to falsify. But judged against its own goals—peace, a rules-based order, and the maintenance of American primacy—the project of liberal internationalism has in many ways failed. The United States’ globe-spanning forward military presence has not prevented the emergence of a peer competitor, as China’s growing power shows. The number of global conflicts is at its highest since 1975, while Freedom House’s recently released report concluded that 2019 marked “the 14th consecutive year of deterioration in political rights and civil liberties.” Meanwhile, the rules-based international order is proving to be paper-thin, not least because it was weakened by a continual stream of American violations, such as the invasion of Iraq and the use of drone strikes and extralegal targeted killings. By almost every foreign policy metric, the United States is worse off today than it was at the end of 1991.

## **A NEW GENERATION**

With a track record like that, experts are easy to blame. Yet Brands and his colleagues are entirely correct that a retreat from expertise is a bad idea. The evidence is all too visible in the Trump administration. Trump adviser Peter Navarro—a man whose books contain made-up quotes from his own alter ego—pushes for a trade war with China. Key negotiations are delegated to the president’s daughter, Ivanka, with predictably laughable results. And the less said about Jared Kushner’s Middle East peace plan, the better.

In his original comments, however, Rhodes wasn’t suggesting that U.S. foreign policy should be run by amateurs—rather, that the D.C. foreign policy community was rigid and unwilling to consider new ideas, such as the Obama administration’s unconventional outreach to Iran. Likewise, scholars attempting to supply a retroactive definition for the Blob have focused on its distinct ideology, not its expertise. For Patrick Porter, for example, the Blob “comprises a class of officials and commentators who worry incessantly about the ‘collapse of the American security order.’” Stephen Walt is clear to note that although the Blob is “not a uniform monolith . . . most of its members embraced an expansive view of U.S. interests and tended to favor the ambitious grand strategy of ‘liberal hegemony.’”

Colloquially, however, the term has become so synonymous with the foreign policy elite that it often conflates expertise with support for hawkish or liberal internationalist U.S. policies. This usage allows defenders of the Blob, such as Brands and his co-authors, to argue that abandoning liberal internationalism is the same as abandoning expertise. But not all experts view the United States as the indispensable nation. Restraint-oriented experts may be less represented in the traditional D.C. foreign policy bastions on Massachusetts Avenue, but they certainly exist. One does not have to look far—to academia or more heterodox think tanks such as the Cato Institute or the newly formed Quincy Institute, for example—to find experts who disagree with the idea that Washington can or should solve nearly every problem with military force. They’re a minority, but a vocal and an active one.

Trump’s administration is not replete with incompetents because he questioned the foreign policy status quo; he has been unable to staff his administration because many capable people concluded that they could not in good conscience serve this president, while others’ willingness to criticize him barred them from service. Outside the administration, however, a rising generation of policy scholars—many under the age of 35—have witnessed firsthand the mistakes of Afghanistan and Iraq and experienced the failures of post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy. In line with most of their generation, they see a place for the United States in the world that is more cooperative, multifaceted, and less focused on military intervention. Some prioritize international cooperation on climate change, while others emphasize strengthening U.S.-European ties to balance a rising China; still others talk about using a smaller military footprint to ensure the nation’s security or fostering foreign aid and humanitarian cooperation.

Defending the Blob as the only game in town is convenient for those who subscribe to its consensus, but it sets up a dangerous dichotomy: to claim that expertise and hawkish liberal interventionism are one and the same leaves nothing but Trumpian incompetence as the alternative. That argument serves only the interests of a failed foreign policy and the people behind it. But in relying on a term as ill-defined as the Blob, even critics of the status quo have inadvertently played into this misleading narrative. For those who seek to reform U.S. foreign

policy, the best path may be to send Rhodes's neologism into retirement. Instead of criticizing the Blob, reformers should work to replace it.

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