



Americans Favor Not Isolationism But Restraint

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This article appeared in the Los Angeles Times on December 27, 2013.

A recent Pew Research poll finds that historically high numbers of Americans want their government to do less abroad. That worries many foreign policy elites, who fear that bad wars and growing debt are reviving old-fashioned isolationism.

But the public is neither isolationist nor misguided when it comes to foreign policy. Americans do not want to withdraw from the world; they just prefer not to try to run it with their military. A security strategy made to match those preferences — what we and others call restraint — would keep us out of avoidable trouble and husband our resources, ultimately making us safer and richer.

Pew found that 52% of the respondents agree that “the U.S. should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own,” and that 80% want to “concentrate more on our own national problems” while focusing less on international troubles. Both totals are highs in the 50 years that Pew has periodically asked those questions.

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The trend toward insularity ends there, however. The poll also shows that, while the public remains skeptical about the virtue of trade and immigration, it has not grown more skeptical of late. In other words, Americans are less willing to embark on military adventures abroad, but they are not rejecting the world.

Unfortunately, America’s leaders aren’t on the same page as the American public.

Military spending advocates prevailed in the recent congressional budget negotiations, which may forestall serious consideration of the restraint strategy the people want because higher spending makes preserving the strategic status quo easier.

That is particularly unfortunate because restraint would be a sensible strategy for the United States, even if the country was flush with cash. Restraint aims to preserve U.S. power rather than expend it through occupation of failing states such as Afghanistan and the perpetual defense of healthy allies. Restraint would allow us to capitalize on this country’s chief geopolitical

advantages: geography and wealth. Geography — wide oceans and friendly neighbors — allows us to take a wait-and-see approach to foreign trouble. Wealth lets us buy the technological capabilities that give our military vast superiority over rivals, especially when it comes to tracking and precisely targeting enemy forces from afar or moving firepower to fights.

These advantages mean we don't need our ground forces to be the first line of defense against states that menace others. We can bring force to bear after trouble starts, if necessary. We can likewise avoid sending armies to chase terrorists, or prop up governments in troubled areas where small arms, bombs and other cheap weapons create danger. Special operations forces, covert operators, trainers and airstrikes will mostly suffice.

Capitalizing on our strengths allows prioritization among military forces. Relatively less can be spent on ground forces and more on bombers, carriers, surveillance platforms and missiles launched from aircraft or ships. Funds can be shifted from efforts to manage today's limited threats to researching solutions for tomorrow's.

Some critics may confuse restraint for military transformation — the idea that stand-off weapons, drones and commandos guided from space can substitute for military mass to win wars. They're wrong. Restraint means more modest objectives abroad, not ambitious ones like revolutionizing other states.

Others will complain that ending military alliances means surrendering the benefits of foreign ties: commerce, diplomacy and cultural exchange. But common interests, not military garrisons, produce those results. Pulling troops from Germany, for example, will not shutter our embassy there, halt study abroad programs in Berlin or stop Germans from buying iPhones.

The standard criticism of restraint is that it invites instability, but today's threats are modest by historical standards. The few miscreants in the world who might aspire to cause trouble are incapable of overrunning our rich allies, particularly once they cease free-riding on the U.S. militarily. The European Union, Japan, South Korea and our various Middle Eastern allies can afford to defend themselves. Should that change, we have the time and capability to shift course.

Of course, outlining restraint is the easy part. Implementation is the rub. But the polls show an opportunity. Unlike foreign policy elites, the public appreciates that the United States needn't run the world to be safe in it. We can break the bipartisan consensus that preserves military budgets and avoids strategic choices. Instead, we should adopt a more political foreign policy process, with our leaders competing in elections to give the people the restraint they want.