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The Kochs and Soros teamed up on a new foreign-policy think tank. I have questions.

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The throughline between the Obama and Trump years in foreign policy is members of both administrations complaining about “The Blob.” Both presidents campaign on fresh thinking in foreign policy. One of the problems with the Trump administration from its first year on, however, is that its overall policy competency is so abysmal that it discredits any validity contained in their critique of the Blob.

Other institutions, like think tanks, must harness the intellectual firepower needed to rethink foreign policy. Two years ago I told Vox’s Zack Beauchamp, “This is the iron law of ideas: You can’t beat an idea unless you take the time to think of a better one.” Of course, as I also told Beauchamp, think tanks need funding to exist. It was far from clear that traditional sources of funding would be interested in supporting foreign policy doctrines that were antithetical to their ideological priors.

This has started to change a bit. Both progressives and conservatives have been more vigorous in questioning their priors. And now we can add a new think tank with some intriguing funding sources to the mix. The Boston Globe’s Stephen Kinzer was the first to report on the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, which will “promote an approach to the world based on diplomacy and restraint rather than threats, sanctions, and bombing.”

Two things stand out about the Quincy Institute: its funders and its founders. The funders are George Soros and the Koch brothers. This might confuse those focused on American politics but is unsurprising to anyone who knows that they share a similar lean on foreign affairs. Similarly, the founders come from the progressive left (Stephen Wertheim, Trita Parsi, Suzanne DiMaggio) and the realist right (Andrew Bacevich). The initial approach, as Bacevich told me, was a lean and mean group of thinkers to start with, “a fairly narrow focus: ending endless war; democratizing the formulation of foreign policy, which implies ending the elite monopoly; and putting U.S. policy in East Asia and the Middle East on a sound basis based on prudence, realism, and restraint.”

Unsurprisingly, this focus on restraint has led to a predictable sorting of critics and cheerleaders. The critics come from both sides of the aisle. Neoconservative Bill Kristol is definitely not a fan, tweeting that these ideas would be like reverting back to the interwar period. The Heritage Foundation’s James Jay Carafano branded the Quincy Institute “isolationists [who] would prefer America step off the playing field and wave from the sidelines.” Writing in Foreign Policy,

James Traub is also dubious: “It’s hard to avoid the conclusion that the lesser-footprint crowd is rearranging the world’s problems in order to fit their doctrine.”

The cheerleaders are also predictable. Daniel DePetris wrote in the Washington Examiner that reducing the Quincy Institute’s mission statement to “isolationism” simply demonstrated the poverty of the critics. Similarly, the American Conservative’s Daniel Larison argues, “If there is one thing that the ‘the lesser-footprint crowd’ agrees on, it is that the U.S. is quite bad at solving many of the ‘world’s problems’ and has tended to make many of those problems worse through our unwanted meddling.”

As someone who wants to see a vigorous marketplace for foreign policy ideas, the Quincy Institute sounds like a welcome addition to the Beltway. There are an awful lot of think tanks out there advocating for a sober form of liberal internationalism; surely they can cope with one think tank that advocates a sober version of restraint.

There are two challenges that the Quincy Institute will have to face in attempting to promote “ideas that move U.S. foreign policy away from endless war and toward vigorous diplomacy in the pursuit of international peace,” as its website put it. The first is its approach to the Trump administration. Stephen Wertheim suggests to Slate’s Joshua Keating that, “the foreign policy establishment is ill-equipped to interpret what [is] happening, particularly the foreign policy of Donald Trump, let alone to combat it and steer it in a better direction.” This suggests a critical stance toward the current administration. The National Interest’s Curt Mills, however, writes that, “those familiar with the group’s finances and early approach say this outfit, unlike many traditional organizations in Washington, will not be inveterately hostile to the administration.”

This raises an interesting question: Will the Quincy Institute back Trump policies that approximate restraint, even if those policies fail to possess an internal logic? Based on Bacevich’s latest Los Angeles Times op-ed praising Trump for backing down on Iran, his answer appears to be yes. If I was at Quincy, I would be concerned that too close an association with Trump will tarnish the appeal of their foreign policy philosophy.

The second challenge is always an unfair one for advocates of restraint, but that does not mean it can be wished out of existence. How does the Quincy Institute propose getting from where we are now to a world with a smaller U.S. footprint? Wanting to end the forever wars is a great slogan, but as Bloomberg’s Hal Brands noted recently, wanting to do this and having a plan to do this are two entirely different things.

A recent Century Foundation report advocating a reduced U.S. presence in Syria does an excellent job of being candid about the costs of restraint:

That withdrawing from Syria is the right choice does not mean it will be easy. And the difficulties of extricating troops from Syria serve as a warning about military interventions more generally. Even an ill-conceived intervention, once underway, can create its own compelling logic; military interventions create new policy tools and the perception of leverage, and no matter how they begin there are almost always serious strategic and human costs to ending them.

The Quincy Institute needs to be honest about the costs as well as the benefits of military withdrawal. It also needs to flesh out how the United States should bolster its noncoercive capabilities, so as to put the lie to accusations of isolationism.

Still, critics of restraint should welcome the Quincy Institute with open arms. They join the Cato Institute, the Center for the National Interest and the New America Foundation in the heterodox foreign policy basket. They want to contribute to the foreign policy debate. Let's see if they have something to say.