

Fuel to the Fire: Embracing Restraint

Daniel Larison

October 22, 2019

John Glaser, Christopher Preble, and Trevor Thrall of the Cato Institute have written an excellent study of Trump's foreign policy, *Fuel to the Fire: How Trump Made America's Broken Foreign Policy Even Worse (And How We Can Recover)*. They explain how the president has continued many of the worst elements of U.S. foreign policy at the same time that he has introduced his own destructive impulses and policies. While Trump has occasionally paid lip service to opposing wars and reducing U.S. involvement in conflicts overseas, he has not governed that way. As they say in their introduction, "In practice, however, Trump has come to represent something like the inverse of restraint."

Where advocates of restraint emphasize the need for diplomacy and commerce with as many countries as possible, Trump escalates wars and launches economic wars. Where advocates of restraint urge constructive engagement with other governments to reach mutually beneficial agreements, Trump sees every interaction with other states as a zero-sum, all-or-nothing contest. Restrainers would significantly cut military spending and devote more resources to supporting our diplomats, and Trump has done just the opposite. Not only is the president allergic to restraint as a matter of temperament, but he is so preoccupied with shows of "strength" and "toughness" that he is incapable of breaking with the prevailing U.S. strategy of primacy. Preble, Glaser, and Thrall explore all of this at length, and then they lay out their prescription for what foreign policy restraint would look like. As incisive and devastating as their critique of Trump's failings is, it is their recommendations for a strategy of restraint that make the book truly valuable.

I agree with the thesis of the book, and I find their case for restraint to be compelling. (Full disclosure: I read an advance copy and endorsed the book in a blurb.) It is in many respects the same argument I have been making about Trump's foreign policy for the last three years. No matter what he may say, Trump has acted as the anti-restraint president. He is not only personally combative and impulsive, but he hews to a crude unilateralist and mercenary approach to the world that is incompatible with what our colleagues at the Quincy Institute call responsible statecraft. Trump respects neither international law nor the constraints imposed on him by the Constitution, and he has a similarly cavalier attitude when it comes to using American power to bully and attack other countries that refuse to give in to his excessive demands. Trump's use of the slogan "America First" has nothing to do with being antiwar or staying neutral in foreign wars. The authors point this out early on:

Trump's version of "America First" is not about retreating from the outside world. Rather, it is chauvinist in orientation and militarist in method. It extols martial glory and evinces a constant readiness to respond to foreign enemies who have besmirched our honor or defied our will. (p.7)

This helps to explain why Trump is so quick to make insane threats to destroy other countries and why he keeps leading the U.S. into crises and confrontations that could have been easily avoided. Trump has no problem deepening U.S. entanglements with client states as long as he thinks they pay their way. His greatest anger is reserved for successful diplomatic agreements in which all parties benefited, because he assumes that anything less than capitulation by the other side amounts to a giveaway by the U.S.

Glaser, Preble, and Thrall begin with an overview of U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. That sets the stage for the hubris and overreach that both lead to and followed 9/11, and that in turn paved the way for the backlash that Trump rode into office. They then move into a discussion of why the current strategy of primacy is not worth the substantial costs that the U.S. has to pay to maintain it. As they say, “the benefits are ephemeral, whereas the costs are enormous.” Trump has so far managed to keep costs very high and diminishing what few benefits the U.S. gets. If “primacy is synonymous with military hyperactivity,” as the authors say, Trump has been only too happy to keep feeding it with intensified drone strikes and higher military spending. Almost three years after Trump became president, U.S. military engagement around the world has increased, and just a few months ago the U.S. came dangerously close to launching a new unnecessary war with Iran as a result of the destructive economic war that the U.S. has been waging against them for more than a year. Trump inherited a failing strategy and exacerbated some of its worst flaws.

The authors rightly note that many in the foreign policy establishment have been intent on portraying Trump as an “isolationist,” but this has never squared with his record or his campaign rhetoric:

However, isolationism was always a poor label for someone who advocated seizing Iraq’s oil, unleashing an open-ended air war on ISIS, and picking fights with weak adversaries like Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela. Far from turning inward, Trump has evinced a kind of neo-imperialist tendency, going so far as to encourage his cabinet in late September 2017 to prioritize extracting Afghanistan’s mineral deposits for our own economic gain. (p.67)

Trump’s critics in the foreign policy establishment shoved him into the “isolationist” box to express their hostility to him and because they didn’t know what to make of his views, but almost everything he has done as president has proven them wrong. One reason that so many analysts and pundits keep getting this wrong is that “isolationist” is the default label for anyone that breaks with the consensus, and this lazy use of the slur has made it so that many analysts apply the label to many different figures that have little or nothing in common with each other. “Isolationist” is never accurate, and it is always intended to disparage rather than describe, and in Trump’s case it is about as wrong as you can be.

Likewise, Trump can’t be considered a realist in any meaningful sense. The authors contrast what we should expect from a realist president and what we have seen from him:

Realism, for one thing, puts a premium on shrewd rationality, utility maximization, objective situational judgments, and long-term strategic thinking. A foreign policy informed by realist sensibilities is empathetic; it assesses the interests and gauges the strategic perspectives of other states, including adversaries. Policy is informed by a calculating and nuanced appraisal of tangible threats to the national interest, rather than ideologically motivated crusades. Clearly, this cautious, deliberative, rational realpolitik approach does not describe Trump’s foreign policy

temperament, which is frequently erratic, confused, irrational, and unable to see the world through others' eyes. (p.68)

This leaves us with a foreign policy that is the worst of both worlds: the policy substance of a strategy of primacy married to the impulsive, chaotic mismanagement of an incompetent president. To the extent that there has been change from the status quo, it has mostly been change for the worse from the perspective of advocates of restraint, and for the most part Trump has simply continued and expanded on the awful policies he inherited. The only major policies of his predecessors that he has been intent on reversing have been successful arms control and nonproliferation agreements. The authors sum up the record this way:

Trump has maintained all of America's security commitments and has not withdrawn from any overseas garrisons. U.S. military posture still seeks to dominate not only the Western Hemisphere but also Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and even Africa. Primacy remains America's grand strategy, with all its attendant flaws—albeit with Trumpian flavor. (p.100)

How do we account for Trump's overall adherence to primacy? One answer is that Trump's campaign rhetoric wasn't that much at odds with primacy in the first place. In other words, Trump wasn't running on a platform of major foreign policy changes. For example, his hostility to the JCPOA and his determination to cater to Israel and Saudi Arabia represented a break with Obama's foreign policy, but he was actually aligned with the broad anti-Iranian consensus in Washington. It is a measure of how toxic Trump has become politically and how disastrous support for the war on Yemen has been that his slavish indulgence for the Saudis has become a liability for him now. Iran policy is the perfect example of how Trump has acted as the inept enforcer of a bankrupt status quo, and that is probably why his destructive Iran policy has encountered remarkably little resistance in Congress until it almost got us into a war.

Another answer for Trump's adherence to primacy is that he is far too easily distracted and lacks the discipline to make a major overhaul of U.S. foreign policy. The authors put it this way:

Another perspective suggests that Trump's own indifference toward foreign policy, his chaotic approach to policymaking, and the dysfunctional nature of the Trump White House have combined to make the foreign policy process more turbulent and less predictable—while at the same time making major foreign policy change less likely. (p.132)

An erratic president who can't stay on track during a conversation isn't going to implement sweeping changes to anything. It isn't just that Trump faces significant opposition even from within his own administration, but that he seems incapable of following through and staying on task for more than a few days. More often than not, Trump takes the path of least resistance, and that means that primacy wins by default. Trump isn't interested in fighting to change U.S. foreign policy away from a strategy of primacy, and he wouldn't be able to pull it off even if he were.

Trump's embrace of primacy reminds us why we need to have a foreign policy of restraint. A strategy of primacy is itself an invitation to abuse of power and reckless policies, and a reckless, impulsive president increases the risks from this strategy. Restraint would not only reduce U.S. ambitions and the costs of our foreign policy, but it would also offer future presidents fewer opportunities to wreak havoc. Glaser, Preble, and Thrall spell out how we can start moving towards a strategy of restraint:

The United States should reject the myths of primacy and the hyperactive foreign policy it has promoted. The United States is not the indispensable nation. Nor is it insecure. Nor is it capable of micromanaging the world's affairs efficiently and effectively from Washington, D.C. The United States should instead pursue a more modest foreign policy agenda that facilitates global trade and focuses more narrowly on the physical security of the homeland, while worrying less about trying to control the world. (p.174)

Trump isn't going to take the U.S. in this direction, and there is not much reason to think that he wants to. The beginning of a recovery from the foreign policy failures of the last several decades is to be found in embracing a genuine alternative to the current strategy, and that means embracing restraint.