

# **Fuel to the Fire: How Trump Made America's Broken Foreign Policy Even Worse (and How We Can Recover)**

John Glaser, Christopher A. Preble, A. Trevor Thrall

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*Fuel to the Fire* critiques the past 30 years of U.S. grand strategy, assesses Donald Trump's worldview and foreign policy, and concludes with a proposal for avoiding the errors of the past.

Here are key ideas from our book, and what they mean for policy makers.

## **1. Primacy doesn't pay.**

For the past several decades, and especially since the end of the Cold War, U.S. leaders have pursued a foreign policy built on American military dominance – the doctrine of primacy. The strategy hinges on the belief that overwhelming American power—and especially military power—is the linchpin of global order.

But U.S. military power is not necessary for maintaining peace and prosperity. The international system is safer, and the international economy more durable, than the advocates of primacy allow. International trade operates independently of U.S. efforts to manage it and Americans' ability to access global markets is not contingent upon, and therefore does not justify, the enormous expenses that purport to keep the global commons open.

The costs, meanwhile, go well beyond what U.S. taxpayers spend on the nation's military. Americans enjoy fewer freedoms at home and are exposed to greater risks on account of the militarism on which primacy depends.

On the whole, primacy is synonymous with military hyperactivity. America's frequent interventions have caused many observers, both at home and abroad, to question U.S. global leadership.

Rather than relying on a single dominant nation to punish bad actors, Americans—and the rest of the world—should favor an arrangement whereby the many beneficiaries of a peaceful global order contribute meaningfully to maintaining it.

## **2. Despite his rhetoric, President Trump's foreign policy is a continuation, not a break, with the past.**

As Donald J. Trump rose to power, his foreign policy vision, such as it is, was considerably out of step with the Washington, DC, foreign policy community. He even occasionally stumbled upon some of the same arguments frequently made by advocates of restraint, an alternative strategy that calls for narrowing the definition of US interests, pulling back from global security

commitments, and adopting a more modest set of objectives. Trump, for example, excoriated the decades-old policy of extending security guarantees to rich, powerful, and safe allies abroad, and questioned the wisdom of some foreign wars.

But in practice Trump's foreign policy is closer to the inverse of restraint. Advocates of restraint tend to favor low-tariff free trade, liberal immigration policies, robust diplomacy, and a reduced military role for the United States. By contrast, Trump favors economic protectionism, restricted immigration, weakened diplomacy, and energetic militarism, and he continued, or even expanded, many of the wars that he inherited.

Worse yet, the Trump administration's conduct of foreign policy has been impulsive, ad hoc, and incompetent. Even when the president has been able to wrench the debate toward his worldview, the result has been a mixture of backlash, false starts, and foolish policies.

### **3. It's time for a more restrained American foreign policy.**

Thanks in part to Trump, but also to the rapidly changing international environment, partisans on all sides recognize the need to reimagine American foreign policy. But in contrast to many who see a rising China and an aggressive Russia as harbingers of a new Cold War, we argue that the time is right to embrace a more restrained foreign policy.

#### **Moving forward, American foreign policy should embrace three basic principles:**

1. With respect to national security it should focus on protection of the American homeland, not on controlling the behavior of other nations around the globe. A strategy that prescribes constant intervention around the world is simply not necessary for the United State to ensure its own security.
2. The primary tools of American engagement should be diplomacy, commerce, and cooperation, rather than military force. The post-9/11 wars have made the staggering costs and strategic limits of an interventionist foreign policy ever clearer. Military intervention tends to cause more problems than it solves.
3. American foreign policy must align with the liberal values and norms traditionally espoused by U.S. political leaders. Primacy – especially Trump's version of it – has eroded America's moral authority and undermined the normative, rules-based character of the international system.

The lackluster American foreign policy track record since the end of the Cold War has helped the call for restraint gain traction in the academic community and among the public at large. Survey after survey shows that most Americans oppose both the isolationist and protectionist elements of Trump's America First agenda as well as the reliance on military force of primacy. In short, the public is hungry for a new foreign policy vision and that vision should be restraint. The question is: who will be its champion?

*John Glaser, Christopher A. Preble, and A. Trevor Thrall are the authors of Fuel to the Fire: How Trump Made America's Broken Foreign Policy Even Worse (and How We Can Recover) (Cato Institute, 2019).*

