

Excessive US Military Interventions Come with a Cost

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There is a lot that's wrong with US foreign policy right now, but a broader look at US grand strategy in the post-Cold War era reveals just how broken things have been across administrations of both parties.

But America doesn't act as if it is safe.

The post-Cold War era has seen a continuation of a long global trend toward greater peace and stability, lower rates of conflict, and zero great power wars. More peace and diminishing threats have merely enhanced the remarkable security already enjoyed by the United States thanks to its geographic isolation, weak neighbors, unparalleled economic and military power, and its nuclear deterrent.

Continual Warfare

But America doesn't act as if it is safe. Instead, we have a hyper-interventionist foreign policy. Over the last century, according to the Rand Corporation, "there was only one brief period – the four years immediately after US withdrawal from Vietnam – during which the United States did not engage in any interventions abroad." Indeed, "the number and scale of US military interventions rose rapidly in the aftermath of the Cold War, just as [rates of global] conflict began to subside."

According to data from the Congressional Research Service, the United States has engaged in more military interventions in the past 28 years than it had in the previous 190 years of its existence.* About 46 percent of Americans have lived the majority of their lives with the United States at war. Twenty-one percent have lived their entire lives in a state of war.

This suggests a truly perverse defect in the way we are carrying out foreign policy. In an era of unprecedented peace and stability, which should permit a less activist foreign policy, we are finding reasons to intervene militarily at an extraordinary pace, making the past three decades a significant outlier in US history.

Americans have been insulated from the worst effects.

America's role in the world underwent a massive expansion following WWII and again at the end of the Cold War. Washington adopted policies and built bureaucracies that incentivized interventionism. As Joseph Schumpeter once put it in an essay on imperialism, "Created by the wars that required it, the machine now created the wars it required."

Normalizing Aberrant Policy

In some ways, Americans have been insulated from the worst effects of this aberrant post-Cold War foreign policy (the costs have been borne more acutely by certain foreign populations on the receiving end of it). However, there have been costs here at home.

The United States has spent almost \$15 trillion on its military since 1990, an enormous price tag that far exceeds what any other country has spent. This constant state of war also tends to undermine liberal values at home by eroding constitutional checks and balances on war powers, incentivizing excessive government secrecy, and infringing on civil liberties in the name of security. In the oft-cited words of James Madison, “No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.”

America’s unusual post-Cold War foreign policy has in many ways become normalized.

As predicted, Donald Trump has maintained and in some ways expanded America’s militaristic and interventionist role in the world. And Trump’s rise is arguably another indication of how democratic norms can erode in the midst of continual warfare. As with most things, however, America’s unusual post-Cold War foreign policy and Trump’s convention-violating brashness has in many ways become normalized.

If we are ever to break out of this apathy and return once again to a realistic and prudent foreign policy commensurate with the low-threat environment we currently inhabit, we will have to reckon with the steep costs of this expansive grand strategy and wrangle the self-sustaining national security bureaucracy into the austerity it desperately needs.

*The data from the CRS report is helpful, but imperfect and incomplete. It lists 416 “notable deployments of US military forces overseas” from 1798-2017. It lists 212 interventions between 1798 and January 1989 and 204 since then. However, many of the individual items listed in the 19th century involve minor actions like deploying a small naval force to gain the release of a captured US citizen abroad or shows of force against pirates or mischievous whalers – deployments that are too minor to merit an individual itemized listing in later periods. Furthermore, “covert operations, disaster relief, and routine alliance stationing and training exercises are not included,” activities that are far more frequent now than they were in the past. One should consider the multiple covert undeclared drone wars the United States has waged in the post-9/11 era and, of course, programs of coordination with foreign militaries in conflict areas where US forces get killed or wounded, as in Niger recently, but which do not make it on to the list. Finally, CRS bundled many individual post-9/11 deployments and interventions together as a single item on the list, even though they are clearly distinct and included multiple countries in separate regions of the world. This is likely because the executive branch bundled them together when informing Congress of the deployments, which is the primary source for CRS’s data. Completely and accurately accounting for these discrepancies would require a full-length study, but my own ad hoc, and I think conservative, adjustments led me to a breakdown of 199 interventions from 1798 to January 1989 and 213 from 1989 to today.

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