

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

The President's Inbox Election 2020 Series: America's Role in the World

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November 6, 2019

The latest episode of *The President's Inbox* is now live. The Iowa caucuses, the formal start of the presidential nominating process, are just three months away. Given that elections matter for U.S. foreign policy, I thought I would change things up on the podcast. Each week between now and when Iowans cast their votes, I will discuss a major foreign policy challenge with two experts who disagree over how the United States should respond to it. I'm hoping that these discussions, which are made possible in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, will provide a fuller understanding of the challenges awaiting whoever takes the oath of office on January 20, 2021.

For the first episode in this special Election 2020 series, I sat down with [Karen Donfried](#), president of the German Marshall Fund, and [Christopher Preble](#), vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, to discuss whether the United States should be doing less overseas. Karen has long argued for the importance of the transatlantic relationship. Chris has long argued that the United States should pare back its overseas military commitments even as it extends its foreign trading relations.

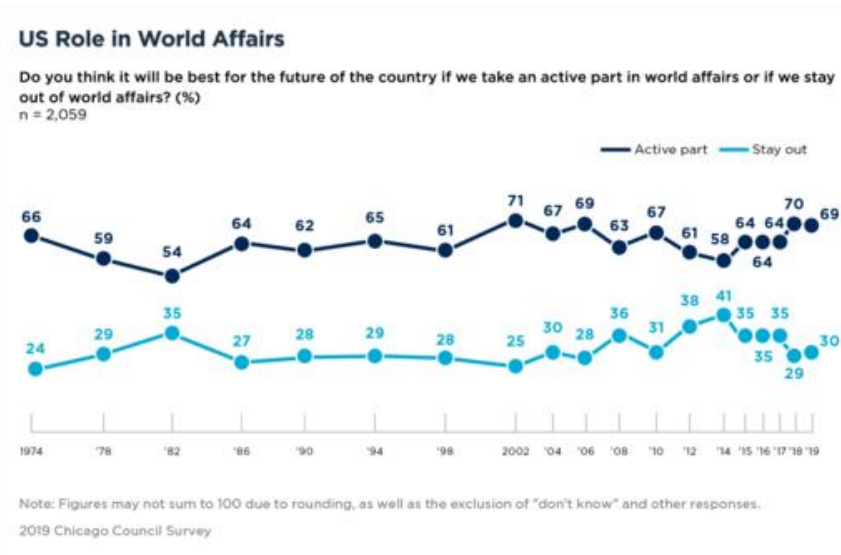
Here are three takeaways from our conversation:

- 1. Disagreements over the level of U.S. involvement overseas can obscure the fact that considerable agreement exists that the United States should be using its military power less and its diplomatic power more.* Both Karen and Chris think that the United States has militarized its foreign policy to a degree that hurts U.S. interests. They would like to see the United States make more use of its diplomatic tools. To judge by a variety of [recent polls](#) and concerns about forever wars, most Americans share those sentiments.
- 2. A critical question is whether American leadership helps or hurts joint efforts to promote peace and prosperity.* Chris worries that U.S. global leadership enables its friends and allies to do less. Karen worries that when the United States fails to lead, America's friends and allies don't see the point in doing more. In short, much of the debate on the U.S. role in the world turn on hard-to-prove calculations about what would happen if the United States scaled back its overseas engagements.
- 3. The debate over the U.S. role in the world isn't going to end anytime soon.* The United States is deeply entangled in the world, and those entanglements come with costs and benefits that partisans on all sides of the debate will continue to argue over.

Lots of people have written on America's role in the world. If you want to learn more about the arguments for the United States to continue playing an active part in world affairs, Robert Kagan's two short books, *The World America Made* and *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World*, provide a useful start. You should also consider CFR President Richard Haass's book, *The World In Disarray*, and my book with Ivo Daalder, *The Empty Throne: America's Abdication of Global Leadership*. Mira Rapp-Hooper and Rebecca Friedman Lissner have written about how the United States can help build a new international order, and they have more recently made the case for making "the defense of openness the overarching goal of [U.S.] global strategy." Karen Donfried argued for the continued importance of NATO in her testimony back in April to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The New York Times summarized the benefits the United States derives from its alliances.

If you want to understand the arguments for the United States to do less in the world, consider starting with Chris Preble's new book, co-written with John Glaser and A. Trevor Thrall, *Fuel to the Fire: How Trump Made America's Broken Foreign Policy Even Worse (and How We Can Recover)*. Another significant contribution is Barry Posen's *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*. Posen, a professor of political science at MIT, summarized the main points of his call for a strategy of "off-shore balancing" in an op-ed for the *New York Times*. Stephen Walt, a professor at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, hits on many of the same themes and ideas in his book, *The Hell of Good Intentions*. He presented a shorter version of his argument in the pages of *Foreign Affairs* earlier this year.

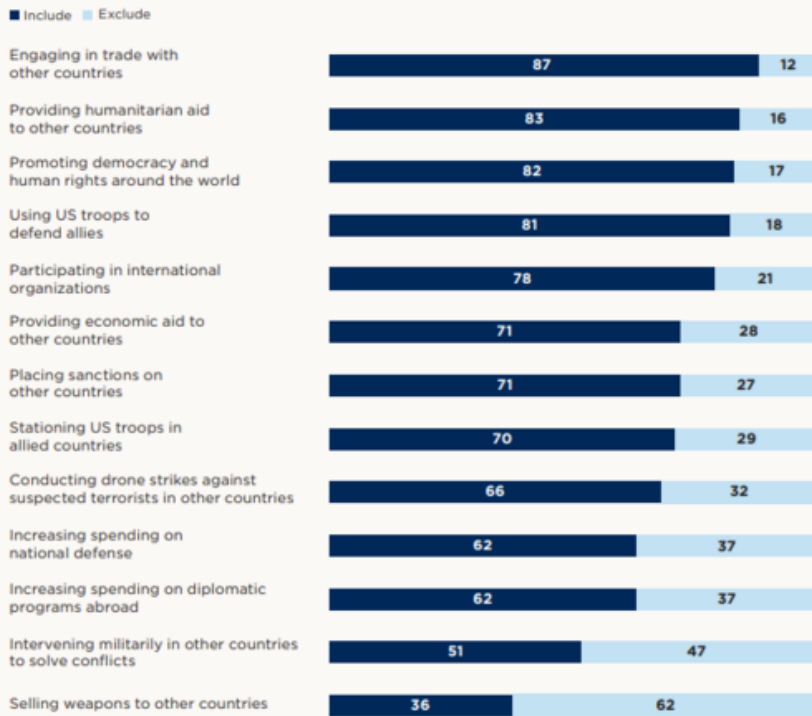
If you are wondering what Americans think about the U.S. role in the world, check out the annual polls conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. [Full disclosure: I sit on the advisory council for those polls.] Here is what Americans have told the Chicago Council over the years about whether the United States should play an active role in the world:



That doesn't look like an America that is turning inward. Of course, you might be wondering what Americans mean when they say that the United States should take an active role in world affairs. This year, the Chicago Council asked respondents just that question:

Figure 3: An Active Part in World Affairs

Taking an active part in world affairs means different things to different people. For you personally, does it include or exclude the following policies? (%)
n = 2,059



Note: Figures may not sum to 100 due to rounding, as well as the exclusion of "don't know" and other responses.
2019 Chicago Council Survey

Military intervention falls near the bottom of the list, though even then—and perhaps somewhat surprisingly given all the talk about ending “forever wars”—a majority of Americans still sees it as part of American engagement in the world.