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Old, Inferior Wine in New Bottles: The House GOP Foreign Policy Report

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The Orlando shooting has eclipsed an important foreign policy report that House Speaker Paul Ryan and his Republican colleagues just released. That report, “Achieving U.S. Security Through Leadership & Liberty,” is an acute disappointment. At a time when America’s foreign policy is floundering and cries out for new thinking, the House GOP offers the opposite. The report is a collection of shopworn (and often fatally discredited) strategies covered by a veneer of mind-numbing clichés.

One striking feature of the document is its lack of realism. There is little in the report that echoes even the myopic “realism” associated with Henry Kissinger and his followers. Instead, there are more passages that read as though they were written by starry-eyed idealists—or at least liberal interventionists like Madeleine Albright, John Kerry, and Hillary Clinton.

Indeed, one passage even asserts that the United States is “the sole, indispensable power that can lead the world” in confronting threats. Even the term echoes Albright’s earlier description of the United States as the indispensable nation. That is perhaps one reason why consistent conservative realists have shown disdain for the study.

The national narcissism embodied in the report has been a perfect blueprint for allies and security clients to free ride on America’s security exertions for decades. Indeed, even the GOP’s presumptive presidential nominee, Donald Trump, has cited the problem. Yet the architects of the House report appear oblivious to the perverse incentives for continued dependency that their attitudes create.

There is also little sense that as a matter of justice to the American people, the European allies should take primary responsibility (and incur the necessary costs and risks) for the security of Europe and adjacent areas. Likewise, Japan, South Korea, and the East Asian allies should take primary responsibility for the security of their region. The House GOP report is shockingly casual about continuing to expend vast amounts of tax dollars and risk American lives for issues

that are, or at least should be, far more important to other populations. It is an awfully high price to pay for the vanity of being “the indispensable power.”

The authors also seem to be reliving the Cold War, equating the far more limited and ambiguous ambitions of Russia and China with the Soviet Union’s malignant expansionism. That is a grotesque misreading of the situation. Vladimir Putin is a nasty, authoritarian ruler, but his actions have been primarily an attempt to preserve a limited security sphere along Russia’s western frontier and rebuff the eastward incursions by NATO and other Western institutions. China’s behavior is that of a major power that wishes to manipulate the existing international order to its benefit, not overthrow that order. One looks in vain for such subtle, but crucial, distinctions in the House GOP report.

The study emphasizes the message that the United States is the standard bearer of liberty in the world. The document insists that Washington must continue its “long tradition of promoting global freedom.”

Such comments constitute either a massive blind spot or phony idealism. Washington’s conduct over the decades has hardly constituted a consistent tradition of support for global freedom. As Malou Innocent and I show in *Perilous Partners: The Benefits and Pitfalls of America’s Alliances with Authoritarian Regimes*, U.S. officials repeatedly made common cause with “friendly dictators” against their own populations during and after the Cold War. Crawling into bed with the likes of the Shah of Iran, Nicaragua’s Anastasio Somoza, South Korea’s Park Chung-hee, the Congo’s Joseph Mobutu, and Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak hardly signaled an American commitment to global freedom. Rather, it was a willingness to work with any regime, no matter how repressive, that was seen as serving U. S. foreign policy goals.

And that standard is still largely intact Washington definitely prefers the current Egyptian military dictator, Abdul Fattah El Sisi, to his Islamist democratic predecessor, Mohamed Morsi, and is lavishing economic and military aid on Sisi’s regime. U.S. officials back the dictatorial royal family in Bahrain against its own subjects, and we remain firmly committed to one of the more loathsome governments on Earth, Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, the material on Middle East policy and the so-called war on terror shows the GOP report at its most intellectually sterile. The authors would persist in the effort to micromanage the turbulent affairs of that region—the same strategy Washington has pursued since at least the Persian Gulf War. They would simply pour more resources and personnel into the strategy, with the belief that stronger U.S. leadership will be a panacea. That is little more than a triumph of hope over more than two decades of exceedingly painful experience.

Anyone who was hoping for innovative thinking from the House GOP report will have to look elsewhere. That document is a compendium of stale ideas that have already led America badly astray.

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