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Americans prefer foreign policy of restraint over interventionism

By Trevor Thrall

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The American people increasingly prefer a restrained U.S. foreign policy to the excessive interventionism that is the status quo in Washington. And the 2016 election is, among other things, a blustering reflection of this emerging public sentiment.

According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, 43 percent of Americans say the United States should mind its own business internationally. Fifty-seven percent of the public feel the U.S. should deal with its own problems, and let other nations deal with their own as best they can. Sixty-nine percent agree that the U.S. should “concentrate more on our own national problems and building up our own strengths and prosperity here at home” and 70 percent say the next president should focus on domestic policy compared to only 17 percent who say the focus should be foreign policy.

These findings strike fear in the hearts of the foreign policy establishment, which worries that such findings foretell a retreat into isolationism. Since the end of the Cold War, the foreign policy establishment has developed a bipartisan consensus around a vision of muscular internationalism. The core of that vision, in the words of the former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, is that the United States is the “indispensable nation,” without whose leadership nuclear weapons will proliferate, conflicts will erupt, and the steady march of democracy and human rights will falter.

But the public’s attitudes are not so much isolationist as they are restrained. See, Beltway elites think that, although the central goal of U.S. foreign policy is national security, America’s position as the world’s sole superpower affords it the ability to pursue ancillary objectives like shaping the “international order” and the domestic behavior of other nations. Hence an expansive foreign policy that heeds the call of intervention in essentially any corner of the globe.

The American public, on the other hand, interprets things differently. They certainly agree that national security is the primary goal of foreign policy. But America’s fortuitous strategic

position and great power allows the public to ignore the rest of the world most of the time in favor of domestic concerns. The public does not view reshaping the world as the goal of foreign policy. In fact, the public, in contrast to the experts, tends to view foreign policy as a mechanism for pursuing domestic goals such as protecting American jobs and promoting U.S. business interests abroad.

This perspective can help us decode the confusing signals from the public about foreign policy. The realist side of the equation helps explain why surveys routinely find, as the Pew survey did, that Americans support a strong military, active counterterrorism efforts and policies to prevent nuclear proliferation. Fifty-five percent say they support policies to keep the United States the strongest military power in the world, and 62 percent support the U.S. military campaign against ISIS. Simply put, if there is a reasonable national security case to be made for a mission, the American public is likely to support it.

The domestic side of the equation, however, ensures that the bar for making such a case is relatively high. Before the rise of ISIS, for example, almost 70 percent of the public believed that the United States had no responsibility to stop the fighting in Syria. This influence is especially pronounced when Americans see interventionist foreign policy operations detracting from progress on domestic issues. Critics of the missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example (including President Obama himself), have frequently argued that the United States should focus on nation-building at home rather than nation-building abroad.

To put it simply, the American public is not isolationist. In fact, the same Pew study finds that fully 91 percent want the United States to take some kind of leadership role in international affairs. At the same time, though, the public's foreign policy preferences are far more restrained than those of the foreign policy establishment. After 15 years of aggressive and costly intervention in the Middle East that have brought little benefit to the U.S., most of the public now views the conventional approach to American foreign policy as a drag on the primary mission of the government, which is making life better here.

In fact, the survey's findings may be the key to explaining the most befuddling presidential election campaign in modern memory. Hillary Clinton clearly represents the Beltway consensus, supporting vigorous American leadership of international institutions coupled with aggressive military intervention. Since domestic policy issues typically dominate elections, Clinton's foreign policy views would not cost her many votes in a normal year.

But the deep unhappiness with the political establishment this year, coupled with Donald Trump's apparent contempt for American activism abroad, may change that. Like all the candidates, Trump has called for a strong military and destroying the Islamic State. But throughout his campaign, he has made it very clear that foreign policy is primarily a tool for solving problems at home, whether fixing trade deals to strengthen a lagging economy, making allies pay for U.S. security commitments or building walls to protect American jobs from illegal immigrants.

Though many have criticized his proposals on substantive grounds, there is no question that Trump's view of foreign policy falls closer to the average American's view.

The Beltway consensus is a much more difficult sell in 2016. Even Clinton's extensive foreign policy experience, which would usually rate as an advantage, has worked against her as both Bernie Sanders and Trump have reminded voters of her role in supporting several of the failed American interventions over the past 15 years.

Regardless of who wins the White House, the public is clear about the foreign policy it wants. The question is, will the next president listen?

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