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The return of the indispensable nation

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Donald Trump promised to “Make America Great Again,” but, come next January, it may very well be Hillary Clinton who restores a belief in American exceptionalism to the White House.

It seems like Clinton has been running almost as much against Obama’s foreign policy views as Trump’s. In stark contrast to Barack Obama, who has aggravated Republican and Democratic leaders alike with his cautious approach to foreign policy, Hillary Clinton has left no doubt that she believes only the United States can provide the leadership the world needs today. If Obama’s foreign policy mantra was “Don’t do stupid sh*t,” Clinton’s mantra is likely to be “Better to do something than to do nothing.”

Based on her own memoir and other reports, Clinton clearly prefers action to passivity. She supported the 2003 war in Iraq when Obama opposed it. Clinton supported sending thousands more troops to Afghanistan, and sending arms to Syrian rebels, long before Obama came around to each idea. And, as Obama later noted, it was Clinton’s championing of intervention that tipped the debate over Libya – a decision that Obama later called his “worst mistake.”

Clinton has supported each of the past seven U.S. military interventions, and two others that didn’t happen. During the presidential campaign, she has repeatedly called for an intensification of the military effort against the Islamic State. Clinton has repeated her intention to impose a no-fly zone in Syria, despite increasing pushback from experts, who point out that a no-fly zone would create a dangerous risk of confrontation with Russian aircraft, and would have little impact on the position of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Even more telling, Clinton promotes this policy despite her private admission, during a speech at Goldman Sachs in 2013, that a no-fly zone would require the United States to “kill a lot of Syrians.” Though she claims she is not interested in sending thousands of troops back to the Middle East, Clinton’s preference for action, tolerance for risk and comfort with military options suggest that an expanded U.S. military presence in Syria, Iraq and even Afghanistan is very likely.

Finally, Clinton is very likely to expand the “war on terror” both at home and abroad. Following the Orlando night club attack, Clinton proposed an “intelligence surge,” and reiterated support for a “no fly, no buy” policy to prevent people on terrorist watch lists from purchasing guns. In a November 2015 speech at the Council on Foreign Relations, Clinton made it clear that her call for an intensified campaign against the Islamic State is just part of her expanded vision of the war on terror. This runs counter to 15 years of evidence that American leadership – and

especially military intervention – is counterproductive. But from everything she has said, it is a safe bet that Clinton will find ways to expand the fight.

In short, where Obama’s foreign policy has been shaped by his recognition of the limits of American power and a hesitation to use it, Clinton’s foreign policy will be guided by her unshakeable faith in American leadership and the world’s need for it. This portends not only a more activist foreign policy over the next four years, but also the inevitable higher costs that come with it. Beyond expanding defense budgets and rising costs for intervention, the United States will put more American lives at risk and continue stirring resentment in the Muslim world. Ready or not, the U.S. is once again the “indispensable nation.”

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