



The erosion of U.S. network power

Daniel W. Drezner

June 17, 2020

One of the dangers in any intellectual movement is that as ideas calcify, the movement ceases to generate anything new and instead becomes a sociological discussion of the members themselves. In recent weeks, for example, the New York Times op-ed page has threatened to drift into an inescapable black hole in which the only subject matter it can comment on is the New York Times op-ed page.

The same thing is true of ongoing foreign policy debates about “the Blob.” What began as a specific criticism of some quarters of the foreign policy community has devolved into spats about who is or who is not a member. I am as guilty as the next person of participating in these debates. After reading Emma Ashford and Jeremy Shapiro’s latest contributions to this genre, however, I can feel that tug of the black hole and would very much like to change course.

This is not a knock on both essayists, who have something to say. Ashford’s Foreign Affairs essay makes sharp points. Her observation that the term itself has drifted from Ben Rhodes’s original formulation to something much more inchoate is spot-on. Her frustration at an intellectual dichotomy between the Trumpists and the foreign policy establishment is palpable: “For those who truly want to reshape Washington’s overweening and militarized foreign policy, the best approach is not to engage in name-calling but to work to replace the existing foreign policy consensus and its disciples with something better.”

The thing is, the bulk of Ashford’s essay focuses on lingering scars, such as NATO expansion, Iraq, Libya and Syria. These are fair matters of debate, and yet it is striking how these hoary foreign policy chestnuts cover a very small slice of the world.

Similarly, Jeremy Shapiro’s essay in the Boston Review considers Mira Rapp-Hooper’s “Shields of the Republic” through the same Trump/Blob lens. Shapiro is wary of the perils of alliance expansion and bemoans Rapp-Hooper’s failure to think beyond the Blob:

The result, as we approach the 2020 election, is a U.S. foreign policy debate that is caught between the solipsistic stupidities of the Trumpians and the tired nostalgia of the Washington foreign policy establishment. Biden's approach has the overwhelming virtue of coherence, and his team has the advantage of competent and honest professionals. But Trump's approach did at least begin with an appreciation that the burdens of global leadership had become unbearable and that the U.S. public increasingly wants a foreign policy focused more on needs at home. U.S. alliances might well have an important role in such a foreign policy, but that role would begin from a recognition that U.S. global leadership is no longer possible or desirable. For all of the many virtues of this book, one wishes that Rapp-Hooper had turned her keen mind to describing that policy in innovative ways rather than providing yet another plan for sustaining U.S. leadership.

Cards on the table: I appreciate the efforts by Ashford, Shapiro et al to articulate a distinct foreign policy vision for the United States. But I find arguments about the undue burden of U.S. leadership to be sterile. The claims that the U.S. network of alliances endangers the United States or risks wider great power conflicts are unconvincing. The claim of public fatigue with liberal internationalism is flat-out false.

These kind of Blob debates inevitably devolve into questions about the use of force. That is a very important question that nonetheless covers a very small portion of U.S. foreign policy.

If 2020 teaches us anything, it should teach us that a competent foreign policy rests on far more than the judicious use of force. Consider the most important piece of international relations news in the past 48 hours. According to the New York Times, Indian and Chinese troops clashed Monday night in the Himalayas, part of an ongoing border dispute that flared up last month. According to the Times, at least 20 Indian troops and an uncounted number of Chinese troops died after "a brawl involving rocks and wooden clubs that was similar to fights that broke out last month."

The Times also noted that, "India seemed caught off guard by the new burst of violence, which the two sides blamed on each other." Writing in the Monkey Cage, Christopher Clary warns that traditional Indian methods to defuse tensions will not be tenable in this particular dust-up.

This is not a clash that involves U.S. allies. But I can remember a time in which the United States possessed enough diplomatic capital and network centrality to function as a mediator between the two nuclear-armed countries. As this border skirmish was heating up, Donald Trump offered to act as a mediator only to be rebuffed by India almost immediately.

Far too often, debates about U.S. foreign policy devolve into arguments about the use of force. Leadership comes from being at the epicenter of key networks, however. The notion of a robust U.S. diplomatic presence in major capitals and international organizations should not be

controversial. And yet, amazingly, the Trump administration seems too lazy to put in the work in these arenas. This is why most experts do not expect Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's scheduled meeting with his Chinese counterpart to yield much progress on anything.

When I read reports that both China and Russia are keen for another four years of the Trump administration, it is unsurprising. If I was a great power watching an archrival stab itself repeatedly, the best thing to do is get out of the way and say nothing.