

‘Generation Z’ and Foreign Policy: Building a Common Vision of Restraint in a Divided Era

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Cultivating any coherent national foreign policy won’t be possible without a common goal, concrete values, and a clear vision of what America is and should be. But a sharp generational divide provides major obstacles to this path forward, also a real chance for much-needed reform.

In the post-Cold War era, American foreign policy considerations seemed to be increasingly separated from domestic issues. Undergirding the American strategy was the spread of liberal democracy around the world—through international institutions or by force. Domestic support of this project was easy in a world that remembered a forceful America defeating the Nazis and landing on the moon. Today’s grandparents and their grandparents remember an America worth fighting for.

The cultural divide between each successive generation is arguably starker today than ever before in history, as the world seems to accelerate at an unrecognizable speed, and as the rules and norms of society change ever more rapidly. From national policy to personal lived experience, the contrast between the younger generation’s parents and grandparents seem to offer less and less guidance in a world so strikingly different today than it was 20 or 30 or 50 years ago.

Generation Z, also called ‘Gen Z,’ ‘iGen,’ or ‘Zoomers,’ is generally thought of as the cohort of young people born after 1997 (I myself belong to this generation). Of course, Millennials were born from the early 1980s up until around 1996, with Generation X before them and the Baby Boomers before them.

Older people (especially policymakers) of the Boomer generation still largely occupy a Cold War mindset, hindering any reasonable rapprochement with Russia to counter a real threat out of Beijing, as Nixon did with China in the seventies. The Zoomer generation, ready to begin joining the American workforce and voting population en masse, does not remember a time of long-lasting national solidarity that defined the Reagan Era. We do not remember the Twin Towers falling, or the short-lived period that saw a united country after the attack.

However, what ‘Gen Z’ does know is a country that has been at war since before many of us were born. They remember the Wall Street crash and rising suicides and deindustrialization and cultural malaise. As the United States faces new international challenges, most notably the rise of China and the decline of American hegemony, a stratified and divided American culture is the biggest obstacle to a national mobilization to counterbalance any foreign threat.

This generational dynamic brings forth both positive and negative potential repercussions for the future. The destruction wrought by decades of failed wars in the Middle East has rightly

prompted a whole generation to ask the most basic questions of war and peace; questions it seems most of the ‘experts’ of the ruling foreign policy blob have pushed aside for too long. It has also brought up new questions: ones of international cooperation, climate change, and whether or not liberal democracy is truly exportable, or whether liberalism itself is a sustainable structure for developed nations today.

In many ways, this makes sense. A generation of young people have grown up in an America with no central mission beyond ‘growth’ and ‘free trade’ and vague notions of ‘freedom.’ Gen Z is the product of parents who bore the brunt of the Sexual Revolution and its aftermath—broken families, falling marriage rates, and globalization have informed the style of the parents of present-day Zoomers, leaving behind a sense of belonging, tradition, and stability.

Consider this: in China, Gen Z is “more willing to spend, fueled by their increased sense of security and optimism for the future,” a stark contrast to distinct levels of financial and personal insecurity for Gen Z in America. The same Bloomberg article cited a 2017 study by the University of Michigan, where nearly 53% of Gen Z High school seniors in the United States said that “the country will get worse in 5 years.”

American cities falter, the country’s government is inert, and the United States is fast losing its international ability to inspire. Looking to a country like China, whose middle class has expanded beyond belief and whose technologically advanced cities have sprung up from the ashes in a matter of two or three short decades, how can a generation growing up in a culture so fractured and devoid of heart support the export of liberalism to an unwilling world?

According to a study by the CATO institute, “Millennials and Generation Z are also less worried about foreign threats than their elders, including terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and the rise of China. And as a recent study by the Center for American Progress found, just 45 percent of Millennials and Generation Z agreed that the United States is stronger when it “takes a leading role in the world” compared to 59 percent of Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation.”

A common vision in which all generations can get behind, especially in the fragmented internet age, has yet to be presented. Simply preserving America’s standing in the world will become more difficult as domestic strife increases. Many young people don’t recognize an America that they want to keep, and would rather turn it upside down.

While this new generation will certainly bring some positives into the foreign policy conversation, with Gen Z's grievances toward wasteful wars, climate change, and a lack of international cooperation, it will also pose new challenges in the form of domestic issues—like student debt, barriers to family formation, and inability to own capital—that contribute to a lack of spirit that must accompany any serious international project.

Great power competition with China will be a signature feature of American politics for decades to come, as it should be. But uniting a coalition of restraint-minded Americans won’t be effective if its core constituency is based around the single-issue of uniting older war-weary Americans with detached Zoomers. It must also consider healing domestic fragmentation by investing in American industry, cities, infrastructure, education, and more—resulting in a healthier, more robust, and optimistic country could possibly one day, again, be ready to unify under a common vision of what the American project should be.