Domestic Hurdles to a Grand Strategy of Restraint

In July 2019, the Council on Foreign Relations invited candidates challenging President Donald Trump in the 2020 election to articulate their position on twelve questions critical to US foreign policy. The final question asked candidates what they deemed the greatest foreign policy accomplishment and mistake of the United States since World War II. Whether referencing the Marshall Plan, the establishment of international organizations, or support for global democracy, a majority of the sixteen candidates who responded signaled fairly strong support for US global leadership. At the same time, half of the respondents mentioned the Iraq War as the biggest US foreign policy mistake; two additional candidates, Kamala Harris and Kristen Gillibrand, also referenced “failed wars” and “endless wars,” respectively. Thus, ten of sixteen candidates signaled some degree of aversion to the recent history of US military intervention.

This snapshot of Democratic candidates suggests that at least certain elements of strategic restraint—the idea that a less activist foreign policy can better maximize and protect US interests—has gained traction over the past decade among US political elites. President Trump’s disparaging remarks against traditional foreign policy elites and demands on allies to contribute more to regional security have also amplified the restraint message as its advocates find a more sympathetic ear in the White House. The message appears to resonate generally with the US public as well. A 2016 Pew Research poll found, for
instance, that 57 percent of Americans think the United States should “deal with its own problems and let others deal with theirs the best they can.”[^4] The US public is war weary, as countless observers note. The people’s representatives (and those that want to represent them in the future) are trying to appeal to that sentiment with promises of greater restraint.

Pundits and academics who advocate a broader grand strategy of restraint see the current period as a long-awaited opportunity—a chance, in short, to move the United States toward a new foreign policy agenda marked by, among other things, a general retrenchment from militarism abroad and “forever wars,” the trimming of longstanding alliance commitments, and a drawdown of troops deployed overseas.[^5] A vision of strategic restraint may help recalibrate the means and ends of US foreign policy. Whether and how such a policy can be implemented, however, is another matter.

This essay explores the domestic challenges and political hurdles that advocates of a grand strategy of restraint face as they push their agenda forward. Although policy experts and academics have debated the strategic merits of restraint-related policies, including offshore balancing and retrenchment, the normative discussion about what grand strategy the United States should pursue has largely proceeded without addressing what Washington can pursue, or what is realistically possible given domestic constraints.

In the first section, we briefly discuss the rise of restraint and its main tenets. In the second section, we discuss three domestic challenges for restrainers moving forward: 1) the divisive effects of partisanship; 2) the absence of vision and values in today’s discourse for restraint; and 3) the problematic image of looking soft on national security in the face of threats abroad. The final section offers prescriptions for how restrainers might overcome these domestic challenges.

**The Increasing Support for a Strategy of Restraint**

From George Washington’s Farewell Address to isolationist streaks in the nineteenth century as well as the interwar years in the early twentieth century, elements of restraint have long existed in US foreign policy. According to proponents of restraint today, what needs to be “restrained” is the overly ambitious, hyper-active foreign policy agenda that restrainers argue has defined post-Cold War US foreign policy. This agenda makes up the so-called “liberal hegemony,” which perpetuates an expansive global military presence, a bloated

[^4]: C. William Walldorf, Jr. and Andrew Yeo

[^5]: What is realistically possible, given domestic constraints?
defense budget, and frequent political and military interventions. Many in the restraint camp brand liberal hegemony counterproductive, wasteful, and a “costly failure”\textsuperscript{6} that ultimately “perform[s] poorly in securing the United States.”\textsuperscript{7} According to restrainers, the problems with liberal hegemony include exacerbating regional turmoil in the Middle East, accelerating geostrategic competition with China and Russia, free-riding among US allies in Europe and Asia, and ballooning the economic deficit that hampers investment at home.\textsuperscript{8}

Guided by balance-of-power realism, restrainers advocate a narrow pursuit of national interests that reduces global military commitments and downplays remaking the world in the US image. As such, they encourage retrenchment from overseas military bases (moving offshore) and greater reliance on allies in specific regions in order to ensure the command of the commons—that is, “command over sea, space, and air”\textsuperscript{9}—while only reengaging militarily when allies cannot balance or manage a potential regional hegemon.\textsuperscript{10} US troop commitments and resources would, according to this idea, align more closely with core national interests directed at maintaining investments in only key regions and functional areas deemed most valuable.\textsuperscript{11}

Although voices of restraint were present in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, such views remained a minority until recently.\textsuperscript{12} Instead, in the wake of the US triumph over the Soviet Union, a strong consensus emerged around US primacy and liberal hegemony. Whether for reasons of parochial self-justification or out of strategic concern, policymakers, scholars, the media, multinational companies, the defense industry, and various interest groups carried an interest in maintaining an activist foreign policy, even as democracy promotion and humanitarian interventions throughout the 2000s proved costly. Liberal hegemony became the default guide—a habit, according to one scholar—to address global problems and maintain US global force posture.\textsuperscript{13}

Old habits do not die easily, but a crisis can function as a wake-up call, opening the door to new policy ideas.\textsuperscript{14} This reality has aided restrainers in recent years. The military quagmires launched in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the 2008 financial crisis, driven by US subprime mortgage lending, traumatized the American public and accentuated perceptions of declining US power. Therefore, a grand strategy of restraint began picking up steam.\textsuperscript{15} Those dissatisfied with and concerned about the ballooning costs of US foreign policy gravitated toward restraint. Major financial backers, most notably the Charles Koch Foundation, began endowing academic programs, research centers, and think tanks in the areas of security studies and foreign policy. This shift has enabled the restraint movement to expand its network over the past decade, cultivating “thought leaders” and training the next generation of international relations scholars and foreign policy thinkers.\textsuperscript{16} In essence, the restraint movement has laid the groundwork to reshape US grand strategy away from the post-World War II liberal orthodoxy.
Domestic Hurdles to a Grand Strategy of Restraint

Straight-line progress toward this end will not be easy for restrainers. A theory of grand strategy like restraint is one thing, but its application is another. Here, domestic politics enter the picture. As some restrainers admit, and many international relations scholars demonstrate, the application of US grand strategy often depends in critical ways on factors at home (rather than pressures from abroad or theories of security developed in the abstract) that set important boundaries for policymaking. Drawing from existing literature, we see three primary domestic obstacles that advocates of restraint must navigate or manage in order to sustain political salience and reshape US grand strategy.

Trump’s elevation of retrenchment is a double-edged sword with potential long-term costs.

Partisanship and the Double-Edged Sword of Trump

Partisanship, especially in the age of Donald Trump, presents challenges for advocates of restraint. From questioning the utility of NATO to proposing troop drawdowns in the Middle East and resisting regime change wars in places like Venezuela, Trump has brought retrenchment into mainstream policy discourse more pointedly than at any other time since the Nixon administration. However, this restraint moment also brings partisan dangers, making Trump’s elevation of retrenchment a double-edged sword with potential heavy costs for restrainers in the long term.

Trump’s foreign policy taints restraint with a partisan brush that likely will lead to a significant backlash with the next Democratic administration, which could come as early as 2021. Until recently, restrainers found no natural home in either political party, being locked out by the dominant paradigm of the post-Cold War period. Trump changed that. While elevating certain aspects of restraint, Trump’s aggressive use of wedge politics has also given restraint a home in the partisan divides of the nation—in this case, the Republican Party. This association is imperfect, of course. After all, some restrainers are highly critical of Trump’s foreign policy (a point to which we return below) and many progressive Democrats, like Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, hold antiwar sentiments that lead to policy ideas consistent with restraint. Despite these caveats, the partisan label will likely stick and eclipse this bipartisanship given the animating force of today’s polarization. Restraint is Trump, Trump is Republican, hence restraint is Republican—so the logic goes.
Today’s uniquely tribal negative partisanship—in essence, a basic dislike and distrust of people from the opposing party—will only make the problem of polarization that much worse for restrainers into the future.\textsuperscript{21} When negative partisanship is strong, leaders find it challenging to adopt policies similar to the other side.\textsuperscript{22} Compounded by the fact that Trump is now the most polarizing president in modern US history, pressure to be the “un-Trump” is especially intense today for Democrats.\textsuperscript{23} Consider, for instance, the repudiation by nearly all Democratic presidential candidates (including Bernie Sanders) of Trump’s October 2019 decision to impetuously withdraw US troops from Syria.\textsuperscript{24} That policy is a major plank in the restraint agenda. It now appears tainted by negative partisanship. In short, restraint faces dangers because of its increasingly close association today with the Republican Party.

Restraint also faces dangers because of how unpopular Trump’s most restraint-based policies are with the US public. While Americans generally support doing less militarily in the world, the picture looks different when US citizens are asked about specific issues at the center of the restraint agenda. Take, for example, troop drawdowns from Middle East conflict zones. This is a big issue for restrainers, yet it does not sit well with the US public—at least not in the way Trump is pursuing it. In sharp contrast to Trump’s newly announced policy, 58 percent of Americans in early 2019 disapproved of a rapid withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{25} In October 2019, polls showed 60 percent disapproved of Trump’s decision to suddenly remove troops from Syria.\textsuperscript{26}

The numbers are even more daunting for restrainers when it comes to US allies. Restrainers advocate abandoning or significantly reducing US commitments to allies like NATO, a theme Trump has echoed.\textsuperscript{27} 77 percent of Americans believe, though, that NATO is good for the United States and should be maintained, with a plurality saying Trump has been too unfriendly toward the transatlantic alliance.\textsuperscript{28} While these poll numbers on the Middle East and NATO may reflect some disdain for Trump’s style rather than the substance of his policies, they nonetheless make it easy for critics to attack restrainers as “Trumpian”—a label almost certain to appear more frequently as the 2020 election season unfolds.\textsuperscript{29}

**Vision and Values**
Restrainers typically think about international affairs in realpolitik terms, meaning that they view the national interest strictly through the lens of geopolitics and discount the importance of values at least as a basis for action abroad and usually in how to perceive the world. US citizens and many of their political leaders do not generally think this way, however. Geopolitical concepts like offshore balancing, force posture, and realignment are unfamiliar or foreign to
Americans in ways that images of Islamic State (IS) fighters beheading a group of Christians or of governments perpetuating genocide against their own people are not. Restraint advocates today are right to emphasize the dangers and costs—especially when it comes to the use of force—that come with a foreign policy too focused on morality. Yet, as history shows, grand strategies that ignore these issues altogether in favor of geopolitics prove out of step with how Americans see their place in the world and are, thus, unsustainable at home over the long term.

Scholarship outside the realpolitik tradition helps explain why. US citizens look at the world not just through the lens of geopolitics, but out of their own liberal identity and values as well. Values do not just fade away or change overnight like a switch that is turned on and off. Instead, they are part of the United States’ DNA. This means that even in periods of greater restraint like today, when the US public is deeply jaded by the experience of protracted conflict such as the war in Afghanistan, a residual interest remains across the nation to stand for liberal values abroad. In fact, sometimes painful scars lead to greater, not less, moralism in US foreign policy as a means to counteract or correct for prior immoral behavior. The trauma of Vietnam indeed produced pullback—the Vietnam Syndrome—for the US public. But it also led to a surge in “creedal passion,” marked by a wave of legislative activity and policies by the subsequent Carter Administration, in particular, to reestablish a moral core to US foreign policy centered on things like protecting human rights abroad.

The same elements of creedal passion are festering today. While US citizens express interest in minding their own business more internationally, recent surveys also show continued deep public interests in promoting US values abroad. A 2017 Gallup poll found 87 percent think it is very (53 percent) or somewhat (34 percent) important for the United States to promote and defend human rights abroad. A similar question by Pew in 2018 yielded nearly identical results. In a significant change from the early post-Iraq years, promoting democracy is something citizens are now showing renewed interest in as well. Pew found that 73 percent think promoting democracy in other nations should hold either top (17 percent) or some (56 percent) priority in US foreign policy. While Americans are skeptical about Iraq-style invasions for these policy ends, they nonetheless remain interested in finding ways to promote and protect liberal values abroad.

This pattern shows up in specific policy areas as well. A wide majority of the US public considers China’s human rights policies to be either very (49 percent) or
somewhat (30 percent) serious. And 61 percent approved of the 2018 US airstrikes following chemical weapons attacks in Syria. And 54 percent disapproved of Trump’s policy toward Saudi Arabia following the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, with 77 percent believing Saudi Arabia should face consequences from the United States for its involvement.

The Khashoggi incident in particular reveals just how strong the values strain is today in the United States. The US House of Representatives and Republican-led Senate voted in summer 2019 to sanction arms sales to Saudi Arabia due to both journalist Jamal Khashoggi’s murder and Saudi Arabia’s brutal war in Yemen (Trump eventually vetoed the measure). Notably, this is one of the rare policy issues—either domestic or international—where congressional Republicans have turned aside partisanship and opposed President Trump, in this case to uphold US values.

Overall, today’s festering moral surge coupled again with possible guilt by association to Trump should give restrainers pause. Nationalism is a powerful force in international politics—a point restrainers often make. The US brand of nationalism, however, carries a distinctly liberal political flare that is not going away any time soon. A narrow, bare-knuckles focus on geopolitics at the expense of traditional American values carries real dangers, then, for restraint moving forward.

The Problem of Looking Soft

Finally, restrainers today face the challenge of becoming widely viewed as “soft” on national security—a politically devastating label that historically tends to push restraint to the margins of major US policy debates. This may sound odd given all the talk among restrainers about power and geopolitics. However, new research on domestic narratives helps explain the depth and nature of this challenge. Scholars find that broad, publicly accepted stories with simple morals often play an important role in shaping US national security policy. Sometimes, these narratives help restrainers. For instance, the Vietnam syndrome lesson of “no more Vietnams” kept the United States out of war in Central America during the 1980s. Today’s Iraq syndrome lesson of “no boots on the ground” has helped prevent US combat invasions in places like Libya and Syria.

At many other points, though, narrative politics become the center of “soft” charges that hurt restrainers. This happens most in periods when narratives set in across the public that focus not on caution and prudence, but instead on the need for greater activism to protect and promote liberal principles and political order abroad. When influential actors use these narratives to build public discourses or movements for action, policymakers fear the political
consequences (electoral and otherwise) of looking “soft” to the public, throw all caution to the wind (oftentimes, against their better judgement), and pursue robust policies abroad that in general do not line-up with restraint.

The robust anticommunism narrative of the Cold War mattered this way. Fear of looking “soft on communism” pressed Presidents Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson to invade Korea and Vietnam, places that both men deemed of little strategic value but necessary to defend in order to avoid electoral setbacks from appearing weak. Since 9/11, another strong liberal narrative—this time around anti-terrorism—has deeply tilted US policy away from restraint. Here again, trying to avoid the label of “soft on terrorism” pushed President George W. Bush toward wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Similar pressure also pushed President Barack Obama to reverse his preferred course of retrenchment from Middle East war zones and re-engage militarily in Iraq and Syria when the Islamic State (IS) emerged as a new terror threat in 2014.41 The urge to go on the offensive arises where narratives set the table for “soft” charges, none of which is good for a grand strategy of restraint.

The narrative landscape in the United States moving forward offers mixed prospects for restrainers. On one hand, the still robust Iraq syndrome will yield benefits for some time to come, especially with respect to the use of force abroad. On the other hand, conditions are increasingly ripe for a resurgent liberal narrative that could produce the “soft” politics that typically marginalize restrainers in policy debates. This is most likely to happen around a still salient anti-terrorism narrative and a possible ramping up of an anti-China or anti-Russia narrative. For instance, a call for off-shore balancing or greater reliance on US allies in response to Chinese and Russian overseas base expansion sounds less compelling than a more active response informed by US power and primacy, even if in theory a restraint strategy were to keep America secure.

When it comes to antiterrorism, Trump’s troop drawdowns in the Middle East already face charges of being soft: “A precipitous departure … will mean choosing to lose,” wrote a group of former government officials in early 2019.42 Others echo similar themes: “Calamitous,” “retreat,” and America “defeating itself.”43 Trump’s October 2019 decision to withdraw from Syria drew the same response. One Democratic candidate for president referred to the move as “basically giving 10,000 ISIS fighters a get-out-of-jail free card,” while another candidate called it “moral weakness.”44 Senator Mitt Romney (R-NV) charged, “Are we so weak and inept diplomatically that Turkey forced the hand of the United States?
Turkey?!!45 In general, discourse like this indicates that a major terrorist attack or series of attacks could quickly lead to a significant domestic political shift against restrainers. At the very least, this would make restrainer goals of troop drawdowns from Middle East conflict zones all but impossible and could lead to new military action in the region. Restrainers would find themselves, once again, politically on the outside looking in.

A Domestic Path toward Restraint

The winds are blowing in the direction of restraint in US foreign policy. To sustain that momentum, restrainers should take several political steps moving forward. First, restrainers need to distance themselves from Trump and build bipartisan coalitions in order to avoid the dangers of polarization. Some restrainers openly disdain Trump; others remain ambivalent or even supportive of him.46 Such mixed messaging will not solve the polarization problem, however. While a full-throated, unified repudiation of Trump is probably a bridge too far for most, restrainers should, at least, collectively and publicly criticize the impetuousness and dearth of strategic thinking in Trump’s foreign policies. This should not be hard to do. After all, restrainers of all stripes advocate a calculated, diplomatic retrenchment coordinated with allies over a long period—years (even a decade), not months or weeks as Trump demands—that strategically avoids destabilizing various regions of the world.47 Restrainers need to say, in short, what restraint is and is not—many of Trump’s policies fall into the latter category, a point restrainers would be wise to emphasize. This point should, in fact, be easier to make now, in light of the regional instability caused by the recent US drawdown from northern Syria. These events demonstrate exactly why strategically calculated retrenchment is necessary. The political salience of restrainers would benefit immensely by making that argument loud and clear.

Distance from Trump will allow space to effectively build bipartisan coalitions as well. Some of this is already happening, in fact—one example is the recently formed Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, funded by the Charles Koch Foundation (right) and George Soros’s Open Society Foundation (left). More of this kind of work is needed. As restrainers build coalitions like these, some moderation will be required as well. Progressives tend, for instance, to prefer multilateralism to unilateralism in ways that make them especially supportive of alliances like NATO.48
Bipartisan bridge building will likely require, then, some restrainers to back away from their most preferred option of abolishing NATO (and other alliances) altogether and accept, perhaps, more modest proposals to rebalance commitments within existing alliance structures instead. While painful for some restrainers to accept, such tradeoffs are a price worth paying for long-term political salience across both aisles and with the US public as well.

Second, restrainers need to find better ways to graft liberal norms embedded in US culture into their messaging and policies. Some early restrainers seemed open to this, supporting sanctions, assistance to help develop the rule of law, and even highly conscribed (i.e., multilateral and short-term) military action in cases of human rights abuses, especially.49 Restrainers need to go back to advocating this limited interventionism and also give more vocal support to aid for elections and civil society development abroad. At the very least, restrainers should publicly and uniformly condemn actions like China’s brutal treatment of protestors in Hong Kong and stand up for liberal opposition forces in places such as Iran and Venezuela. Public statements of this sort (backed perhaps by support for sanctions in some cases) will not automatically lead down the slippery slope of military force as restrainers fear. They will, however, go a long way toward helping restraint better resonate with the US public and policy elites. Given Trump’s virtual abdication of morality in US foreign policy, even minimal steps toward support for traditional US values abroad would help with the polarization problem that restrainers face today as well.

Third, advocates of restraint need to build more from the grassroots of the American public up. Funding research centers and think tanks is a start. But persuading middle America to see restraint as the American way of conducting global affairs is vital to sustain a robust alternative that at least moderates some of the more militaristic overreach that comes, at times, to US foreign policy. This kind of work requires encouraging a broad national discussion about the policy advantages and especially disadvantages of robust narratives in public thinking about foreign policy. It is important to break down common assumptions (such as the illusion that terrorism is an existential threat capable of destroying western civilization) that often lead to over-reactions and overly militarized solutions to policy challenges. It is also important to use history to teach lessons along these lines. Thus, when the next crisis emerges from a major terrorist attack or an overly assertive great power, the public will be less primed and less subject to manipulation by actors interested in excessive action abroad that strays from important dictates of restraint. This kind of narrative excavation will help ensure that charges of being “soft” on national security either become less prominent or carry less political weight, allowing space for more pragmatic policy options to take shape.50 Ultimately, that shift will be good for restraint.
Each of these steps requires some moderation from the options that prominent restrainers prefer most—a kind of tilting toward pragmatic restraint or restrained internationalism. These tradeoffs will be worthwhile, however, if restrainers want to stay in the long game politically and help shape the direction of US foreign policy—not just today but for decades to come.

Notes

2. “Candidates Answer CFR’s Questions.”
6. Walt, Hell of Good Intentions, xi.
8. Walt, Hell of Good Intentions, chap. 2; Posen, Restraint, chap. 1.


27. For examples, see Posen, *Restraint*, 33–44; Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, “Come Home.”


39. Walldorf, To Shape Our World for Good.

40. Walldorf, To Shape Our World for Good, 189–98.

41. On the impact of this kind of narrative pressure in Bush’s decision making as well as that of other presidents in the postwar period, see Walldorf, To Shape Our World for Good, chaps 3, 4, and 6.


44. Milbank, “Democrats Flip the Script.”
47. Posen, Restraint.