

A Middle Path? US Public Opinion and Grand Strategy

Written by Ionut Popescu

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IONUT POPESCU, MAR 3 2019

In recent years, a sharp debate dominates the scholarly literature on American foreign policy and grand strategy: should the United States retrench from the expansive commitments undertaken in the aftermath of World War II as a globe-spanning military superpower, or should it renew its efforts to pursue the present strategy of global leadership? This issue is not merely of parochial interest to academics; rather, it represents the key dilemma faced by Washington foreign policymakers in the aftermath of the 2016 election campaign and the changes brought by the anti-establishment Trump presidency. Both sides of this debate contend that the American public supports their preferred strategy. However, a closer examination of recent public opinion data actually shows that the American people favor a “middle path” rather than either of the two preferred grand strategies advanced by proponents of *Global Leadership* and *Restraint*, respectively.

To preview the findings of this article, the American public largely agrees with the *Global Leadership* grand strategy on the benefits of military commitment to America's longtime allies and of international institutions, as well as on the importance of international trade to the US economy. It agrees with the *Restraint* school, however, on the need to reduce military interventions in the Middle East. And lastly, when it comes to human rights and democracy promotion, the public is divided along partisan lines, with Democrats being much more supportive of these policies than Republicans. The fact that the public doesn't fully support either approach indicates the possibility for the development of a “middle path” grand strategy that combines the popular elements of each of the two dominant paradigms.

The Debate: Global Leadership vs. Restraint

The scholarship on modern US grand strategy is divided into two schools of thought. On one hand, scholars such as John Mearsheimer, Barry Posen, Stephen Walt, Christopher Layne or Eugene Gholtz argue in favor of a “Restraint” paradigm (also called Retrenchment).[1] In this view, the United States would be best served by greatly diminishing many of its security commitments and alliances around the world, as well as its involvement in international institutions. This would allow for the lowering of expenditures on military and international affairs, and refocusing instead on the narrower task of defending the US homeland. These scholars regard the expenditures incurred in recent decades of American global leadership as far surpassing the benefits gained, and they believe that the US could protect its national interests at a much lower cost by adopting a new grand strategy of Restraint. On the question of public opinion that most concerns this paper, the support received by isolationist sentiments during the 2016 presidential campaign is regarded by these experts as evidence that the American public would indeed favor such a shift to a restrained approach.[2]

In contrast, defenders of the *Global Leadership* framework, including scholars such as William Wohlforth, Stephen Brooks, John Ikenberry, Hal Brands or Peter Feaver, argue that US “Global Leadership” continues to be the right strategic framework that ought to guide US foreign policy in the next decades.[3] In their view, the post-World War II American dominance of a liberal world order, for all its faults, nevertheless set the stage for a period of unparalleled peace and prosperity in relative terms. And in contrast with the view of *Restraint* advocates, such scholars believe that despite some recent skepticism during the 2016 campaign, the American public generally supports the current liberal internationalist grand strategy of Global Leadership.[4]

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Is the American public on board with either of these two competing visions for Washington's role in the world?

Recent polls on a number of the contrasting recommendations made by each school of thought show that the general public is not firmly rooted in either camp. The data shows the public holds conflicting views, and indicates a majority of Americans might be supporting a "middle path" that borrows elements from both grand strategies. The polling on four key foreign policy and national security issues in particular supports this thesis: alliances/international institutions, the role of free trade, military intervention and the use of force, and the US efforts to promote human rights and democracy worldwide.

A Divided Public

The first principle of US grand strategy that has been hotly disputed in recent years was the American commitment to its post-WWII *global alliance system*, particularly NATO, and more broadly the willingness to work through *international organizations* in a multilateral fashion. Restraint advocates criticized the current expansive US commitments, while Global Leadership proponents launched a wholehearted defense of this pillar of US grand strategy. According to the 2018 Chicago Council Survey, despite, or perhaps because of, Donald Trump's harsh rhetoric towards NATO, the American public shows increasing support for this military alliance. For example, 18% of Americans want America to increase its support for NATO (up from 12 percent in 2016), while 57 more want to keep the same level of commitment.[5] In total, 75 percent of the respondents, therefore, support Washington's commitment to NATO, a finding offering support to the *Global Leadership* paradigm. Furthermore, solid majorities continue to support the actual use of US military troops to defend traditional allies: 64 percent of Americans favor defending South Korea and Japan against North Korea. A narrower majority (54 percent) would be willing to use American troops to defend the Baltic NATO states in the case of a potential Russian invasion.[6] When questioned about America's participation in multilateral and international organizations, the Chicago survey found that about two thirds of Americans are in favor of staying in international agreements such as the Paris Accords or the Iran nuclear deal. A recent Gallup Survey similarly found that 63% of Americans want the United States to "work with organizations such as the United Nations to bring about world cooperation," the highest level of support in sixteen years.[7] In partial contrast to the Chicago and Gallup results, a recent Pew Research Center study found that only 39% of Americans consider strengthening the United Nations to be a top US foreign policy priority, and that more Americans (40 percent) disapprove of the Iran nuclear deal than approve (32) percent.[8] Overall, the *Global Leadership* position is better supported by the data than the *Restraint* position on this first set of issues.

Second, and partly related to the issues above, is the desirability for the United States military to engage in *protracted interventions* to support the current "liberal international order". Once more, Restraint proponents strongly criticized the willingness of post-Cold War presidents to deploy US combat troops in places such as the Balkans, the Middle East, and to a lesser extent Africa. On the contrary, defenders of the current grand strategy continue to see at least some merit in continuing to fight in places such as Syria and Afghanistan in order to defeat transnational terrorist threats that would otherwise threaten important US interests. The most recent and pertinent polling on this issue, conducted in January 2019 by YouGov at the request of the Charles Koch Institute, shows that the American public is quite skeptical of the wisdom of US military interventions in places like Syria and Afghanistan. Almost twice as many respondents do not think it is necessary for the safety of the United States to continue the war in Afghanistan (40 percent vs. 24 percent), while a slight majority of all Americans (51 percent) would support the withdrawal of all US troops from that conflict within a year, compared to only 22 percent who would oppose it.[9] In the case of Syria, the public sentiment was more closely divided depending on whether the question was framed as a US fight against ISIS or US involvement in the civil war against Assad; however, more Americans favor withdrawal than oppose it in either of the two cases (38 percent vs 34 percent with regards to fighting ISIS, 41 percent to 32 percent with regards to fighting in the civil war). These findings indicate an understandable reluctance of the US public to launch military interventions in the aftermath of the expensive and inconclusive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the messy aftermaths of Libya and Syria. As such, this lends support to the *Restraint* school's strategic recommendations on this matter.

A third difference between the two competing grand strategy frameworks is the debate over promoting *free trade* and economic *globalization*, as opposed to reverting to a more protectionist foreign economic policy, particularly vis-à-vis geopolitical rivals like China. Somewhat surprisingly given the history of polling on this issue, the most recent

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Chicago Council Survey found record levels of support for international trade in 2018. More specifically, 85 percent of the Survey's respondents believe trade is good for consumers like them, 82 percent think it's good for the US economy, and 67 percent even considered it good for creating jobs in the United States.[10] A separate Gallup survey concurs with the increase in the US public's positive attitudes towards trade and globalization, with 70 percent of the public (up from 58 percent two years ago) now viewing international trade as an opportunity for growth through increased exports versus only 25 percent who regarded it as a threat to the economy from foreign imports.[11] However, a separate Gallup survey also revealed that the Trump administration is in sync with the public on the specific issue of the unfairness of the economic relations with China: 62 percent of the public believes China's trade practices are unfair, versus 30 percent who find trade with Beijing to be fair.[12] This survey also found a much closer result in terms of how Americans perceive the impact on trade on their own family situation (22 percent "helpful" vs. 20 percent "harmful", with a majority 59 percent not knowing), a result somewhat mimicked when the same question was asked in regards to their employer rather than their family (25 percent "helpful" vs. 15 percent "harmful", with a majority 60 percent not knowing).[13] All in all, the *Global Leadership* grand strategy is better supported by the data on this issue: the American public remains broadly supportive of international trade and an open global economy, even though Americans are indeed concerned about the unfairness of Chinese trade practices.

Lastly, the Restraint school of thought advocates for a more "realist" approach to soft power considerations such as the active promotion of US values like *human rights and democracy* around the world, while the Global Leadership scholars, in contrast, argue that this pillar of US grand strategy must not be weakened. The Pew poll found limited support for the ideas that "promoting and defending human rights in other countries" and "promoting democracy" should represent top US foreign policy priorities. Only 31 percent of respondents favored human rights promotion, while merely 17 percent advocated for democracy promotion.[14] It must be noted as well the stark partisan divide in each of these two cases: twice as many Democrats than Republicans answered them favorably as opposed to unfavorably (39% vs 20% on human rights, 22% vs. 11% on democracy promotion). The Chicago Council Survey also asked whether the "decline of democracy around the world" is a critical threat to the United States, and found that 43 percent of the public answered positively, with a significant partisan divide as well (54 percent of Democrats agreed, compared to 36 percent of independents and Republicans). This mixed data does not clearly support either school. Instead, it suggests a more pronounced partisan split, with Democrats being significantly more favorably disposed towards the Global Leadership paradigm position on these issues than Republicans and independents.

Support for a Middle Path

In conclusion, the American public does not wholeheartedly favor either of the two major paradigms currently advanced by scholars and policymakers. Given that a key element to any successful sustainable grand strategy in the long run is its ability to gain the support of the public, this study indicates the need for a third alternative to the two dominant approaches. The recent data indicates that a new 'middle path' paradigm is possible, one that incorporates those elements of both restraint and global leadership that the public supports, while abandoning the unpopular ones. Such a third alternative to *Restraint* and *Global Leadership* offers a realistic centrist option for a new direction in American foreign policy, one that is worthy of more consideration by scholars and practitioners alike.

Notes:

[1] Barry Posen – *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2014); John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no.4 (July/August 2016): 58-70; Harvey M. Sapolsky, Benjamin H. Friedman, Eugene Gholz, and Daryl G. Press, "Restraining Order," *World Affairs*, Vol. 172, no.2 (2009), pp. 84-94.

[2] <https://www.charleskochinstitute.org/news/new-survey-americans-open-withdraw-afghanistan-syria/>

[3] Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, 'Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment,' *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2013), pp. 7-51; Hal Brands, Peter D. Feaver, John J. Mearsheimer, and Stephen Walt, "Should America Retrench?," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no.6 (November/December

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2016): 159-164; Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, 'Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement,' *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 92, no. 1 (2013), pp. 130-142; ; Peter Feaver, 'American Grand Strategy at the Crossroads: Leading From the Front, Leading From Behind, or Not Leading at All' in Richard Fontaine and Kristin M. Lord, eds., *America's Path: Grand Strategy for the Next Administration* (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2012)

[4] Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *America Engaged*, October 2018. Accessed at <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/america-engaged>

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Frank Newport, "Trump's Foreign Policy and American Public Opinion," *Gallup*, accessed at: https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/237134/trump-foreign-policy-american-public-opinion.aspx?g_source=link_NEWSV9&g_medium=TOPIC&g_campaign=item_&g_content=Trump%27s%2520Foreign%2520Policy%2520and%2520American%2520Public%2520Opinion

[8] *Pew Research Center*, "Conflicting Partisan Priorities for U.S. Foreign Policy" November 2018, accessed at <http://www.people-press.org/2018/11/29/conflicting-partisan-priorities-for-u-s-foreign-policy/> and

"Public Is Skeptical of the Iran Agreement – and Trump's Handling of the Issue," May 2018, accessed at <http://www.people-press.org/2018/05/08/public-is-skeptical-of-the-iran-agreement-and-trumps-handling-of-the-issue/>

[9] Charles Koch Institute, "New Survey: Americans Open to Withdraw from Afghanistan, Syria," January 2019, accessed at: <https://www.charleskochinstitute.org/news/new-survey-americans-open-withdraw-afghanistan-syria/>

[10] Chicago Council, *America Engaged*

[11] Jeffrey Jones, "In U.S., Positive Attitudes Toward Foreign Trade Stay High," *Gallup*, March 2018, accessed at: https://news.gallup.com/poll/228317/positive-attitudes-toward-foreign-trade-stay-high.aspx?g_source=link_newsV9&g_campaign=item_236843&g_medium=copy

[12] Frank Newport, Americans Say China Trade Unfair, Trade With Canada, EU Fair," *Gallup*, July 2018, accessed at: https://news.gallup.com/poll/236843/americans-say-china-trade-unfair-trade-canada-fair.aspx?g_source=link_newsV9&g_campaign=item_237134&g_medium=copy

[13] Ibid.

[14] Gallup, *Conflicting Priorities*

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