

Revisiting the Assumptions Behind American Foreign Policy

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U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, and in many regards since end of World War II has rested on several assumptions not about the nature of the world or of the threats facing the U.S., but about the U.S. and America's perception of itself. Several key components of American foreign policy in its internationalist form including democracy promotion, foreign assistance generally, the unique role the U.S. seeks to play in global security issues, the U.S. military presence in almost every corner of the world, and the emphasis on human rights all are based upon the U.S. viewing itself as both able to make an impact and affluent enough to afford trying.

If the people of the U.S. begin to doubt these presumptions, it is only a matter of time until ambitious politicians take these positions too, thus imperiling the framework in which American foreign policy has occurred for decades. If that happens, it is almost unimaginable that U.S. foreign policy could continue to look as it has for most of the last 65 years. In this scenario, every proposal, whether seeking to intervene in countries like Libya to prevent widespread civilian casualties, helping post-authoritarian countries like Egypt or Tunisia to become more democratic, sending troops or opening bases anywhere, would not be met by either consensus or a partisan debate, but by a large chunk of voters who believed that these programs cannot succeed and are too expensive. These are much harder charges for advocates to rebut than simple partisan or even ideological critiques.

Additionally, much of American foreign policy is implicitly based upon a vision of the U.S. as affluent and in a position to either help other people around the world or to pursue a wide range of policy goals despite their costs. With a growing awareness of the deep deficit problems facing the country by both ordinary Americans and political elites, this will become increasingly difficult to sustain. Much of American foreign policy becomes more difficult to defend if it is preceded by a discussion of whether or not it is affordable, particularly if this discussion is either framed by a question of priorities or the reality that pursuing many foreign policies means going further into debt. The abstract reasons to do something reasonably straightforward like, for example, provide resources to observe an election in Armenia, are much less appealing to voters and their representatives, when it is honestly weighed against providing a few more months of unemployment insurance to even a very small number of people, or against the financial cost of borrowing even more money from China to do it.

To a great extent, the difficult part of the challenge facing the U.S. is not finding a way to bring its budget back into balance or of maintaining its role as the world's most powerful country with interests and activities in almost every corner of the planet. The hard part of this challenge is to do both of these things at the same time. The U.S. can avoid having

its debt become a crippling problem either by changing its role in the world or, of course, by taxing its citizens as most modern states do. Given the unlikelihood of the latter occurring, it seems as if the country is caught between the rock of deep debt and further budget crises and the hard place of radically rethinking its role and position in the world.

While many components of U.S. foreign policy, particularly those related to foreign assistance, do not cost, in relative terms, a large amount of money, it is the broader foreign and more substantial foreign policy costs including things like bases, military interventions and the like which will have to be reexamined as well. Cavalierly continuing these policies and maintaining the outlook that makes these policies possible will become increasingly difficult as Americans begin to see their country difficulty and no longer believe that the U.S. is able to achieve many of its foreign policy, especially in a financial context that reinforces these evolving views.