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It seems to be an article of faith among many members of the U.S. foreign policy community that, whenever Donald Trump—and his administration—leaves office, a subsequent president (whether a Democrat or a non-Trumpist Republican) will push a reset button that will return the United States to its position in world affairs that it occupied in 2008 or 2016. They take reassurance in the assumption, however, that Trump’s presidency can only represent a brief aberration and that, as [Lawrence Freedman notes](#), “When Trump ceases to be President, things should return to normal.”

Leaving aside the extent to which the disruptions caused by the Trump administration will have already caused major changes in the international system, which may preclude any reset, such a perspective also seems to ignore changes which ongoing technological, demographic, economic, and military trends are likely to produce in how U.S. foreign policy is understood. Even if Trump had not been nominated and elected and Hillary Clinton, Marco Rubio, or Jeb Bush were sitting in the White House, these trends would still be at work reshaping our understanding of U.S. national interests.

Part of the problem is the blind spot in how evolution in the U.S. domestic political and economic systems over the next decade is being assessed, without making the connection as to how change “at home” will also invariably alter how Americans perceive and conceptualize U.S. national interests abroad. Domestic policy analysts, for instance, make predictions of shifts in voting blocs based on their assessments of these trends, yet the assumption seems to be that the post-Cold War bipartisan consensus for U.S. foreign policy, the one that Trump is disrupting, is somehow fixed and enduring. It is not. Indeed, in the work, especially the focus groups, that I have undertaken as part of the [U.S. global engagement program at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs](#), I believe that even if a future president is personally committed to a robust U.S. role in the international system, there are trends at work which will contribute to domestic political pressure for American retrenchment and even a partial withdrawal from our current posture of forwarding engagement.

First, there are the ongoing shifts in how force is deployed in both its conventional and non-conventional means. Changes in technology—advances in artificial intelligence, drones, and cyber capabilities among them—are undermining the post-Cold War advantages that the

United States has enjoyed in being able to project power far beyond its shores. We are moving from a 1990s paradigm where an American carrier battle group could be sent to distant shores at low risk of casualties (for Americans) and a high chance of achieving success to a situation where the expensive behemoths of U.S. conventional military might are subject both to low-cost defensive measures and relatively cheap unconventional assaults. Today, a bevy of anti-ship missiles that cost \$50,000 each to produce and which have a longer range than carrier-based aircraft have a high probability of sending a billion-dollar ship to Davy Jones' locker, while teams of wage-salary hackers stand a good chance of being able to blind, confuse, disrupt, or even shut down vital systems essential to American military operations. Conventional defence, particularly in the realm of anti-access/area denial (in other words, keeping someone else out of your immediate backyard) is becoming cheaper and more accessible to more powers, in the same way, that unconventional offence, especially in the cyber realm, is available to a much wider array of players. North Korea and the United States are by no means equals when it comes to conventional economic and military might, but, in the Hobbesian world of cyberspace, any country—no matter how powerful in the “real” world—is subject to fatality in the cyber realm.

The domestic political justification for U.S. power projection abroad, over the last 30 years, has been governed by the low cost/no consequence (especially casualties) paradigm—that Americans will [accept overseas adventures](#) as long as the burdens are kept to an absolute minimum. As long as the United States has engaged with relatively low-tech adversaries or third-tier countries with limited military capabilities, for instance, the costs of military engagements—from Yugoslavia to Libya—have been kept below the threshold of generating larger-scale domestic opposition. If, in the future, new interventions carry greater risks of higher costs—sentiments that both the Obama and Trump administrations had to take into account when contemplating actions in Syria which might have precipitated a more direct clash with Russia—the willingness of both the public in general and Congress, in particular, to continue to extend a blank check to the Chief Executive over questions of war will erode.

Drone technology offers some degree of substitution since the loss of relatively inexpensive machines does not create the same level of anxiety. A shift to more unconventional wars of projecting force—computer viruses, stand-off attacks against infrastructure, a greater use of tools to uncover and confiscate financial assets—may also become the preferred way for the U.S. to harness its still considerable advantages in high technology. But a greater reliance on unmanned systems—particularly as other technological advantages open the prospect that both air- and sea-based munitions could be launched from the continental United States—and cyber systems eliminate the need for a vast network of overseas manned bases.

Up to this point, the standard riposte to such realities was to argue that the United States has a core mission to defend the global commons, in particular, to keep “[the arteries of the international economic system open](#).” After all, the U.S. economy has historically relied on the inflows of energy, raw material, and components to power its engine of economic growth, while at the same time securing its own exports to other markets. Some of this mission, however, can be handed over to other states, who, as they acquire more of the anti-access/area denial capabilities that could keep the U.S. out of their home areas, also are able to take on the responsibility of policing their waters and access points. European and Asian powers should be able to do more to keep vital interconnectors like the Straits of Malacca, the approaches to the Red Sea, and the Arctic passages open, free, and safe for commerce.

At the same time, however, new technologies are reducing the U.S. need for imports. For the first time in a generation, the United States has resumed its position as a [net exporter, rather than importer, of energy](#); in the future, U.S. energy needs are more likely to be met by domestic production rather than through foreign imports. At the same time, [continued improvements in 3-D printing technologies](#) will shift the basis of consumption away from large-scale, mass production of generic parts and goods in favour of being able to tailor specific and detailed requirements to a customer’s own preference. The need for large-scale container ships traversing the oceans carrying mass-produced goods—and thus a requirement for a Navy capable of patrolling the seas—may give way to a series of decentralized domestic producers able to fabricate just-in-time parts for local production and consumption.

Rising costs of forwarding deployment coupled with an erosion in the rationale for a global U.S. presence will also intersect with a third trend: changes in U.S. demographics. What is fascinating to see in the discussions in the U.S. national security community is the belief that the structure and focus of U.S. foreign policy is somehow an enduring and fixed reality—and that Americans will continue to identify with the Euro-Atlantic basin as the premier arena for U.S. foreign policy even as the share of European-descended Americans as a percentage of the U.S. population continues to shrink and as generational change transforms the Cold War from a defining and seminal event in a person’s consciousness to a vague historical memory. Ethnic and generational changes in the [composition of the American demos](#) will certainly have an impact on how Americans prioritize what matters to them in foreign affairs.

When President Donald Trump appeared on the Tucker Carlson show in July 2018 and

appeared to agree with his host's question as to why Americans ought to die for Montenegro, the small Balkan nation that had become the newest member of NATO, the U.S. foreign policy community was aghast. Nevertheless, [conservative commentator Rod Dreher raised the point](#), "What, exactly, is so important about Montenegro that it's worth committing the United States to wage war on countries that threaten it?" For Trump, the question is directed at the core of his supporters in the American heartland who are responsive to more isolationist themes. It is also a question, however, which resonates with Millennials and "Generation Z," who are less connected to the project of completing the construction of a "Europe whole and free" which defined the post-Cold War era. Moreover, it is also a question that an increasing number of Americans who feel more connected to the global South and East are also asking. If Africa is now the region of the world with the fastest rate of economic growth; if the Indo-Pacific basin is emerging as the major engine for global growth; or if the future of the United States is increasingly tied to its north-south relations within the hemisphere as opposed to an east-west connection across Europe into the Eurasian heartland, then why shouldn't U.S. foreign policy priorities also change? [Some of the proposals](#) which have so far languished for shifting the U.S. focus southward may gain currency in coming years as more Americans with personal, familial, cultural, and business connections to these areas begin to assume a greater presence in the American foreign policy process.

The bipartisan foreign policy consensus that emerged after 1989 was rooted in very specific understandings of U.S. economic and security interests. Thirty years later, those assumptions are subject to debate—a conversation that will continue through and beyond the Trump administration.

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