A GRAND STRATEGY ESSAY

Domestic Foundations of Foreign Policy vs. Foreign Policy Distractions from Domestic Foundations

by James D. Fearon

Working Group on Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy
www.hoover.org/taskforces/foreign-policy

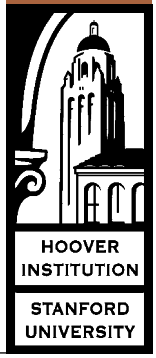
The question: To what extent is the president's ability to implement a coherent and robust foreign policy constrained by domestic political, institutional, and economic challenges? The answer: Not much in the medium run.

In the very short run, congressional opposition to any feasible deal with Iran on its nuclear program seems to me to increase the risk of either a preventive war or, more likely, Iran developing nuclear weapons capability. So, if in the end Congress contributes to preventing a deal, this would be an example of a significant domestic constraint on the president's ability to implement a coherent and robust foreign policy.

In the medium run, the biggest and most important domestic constraint on US foreign policy is likely to be fiscal. Rather than raise taxes to maintain both Social Security/Medicare *and* a $1-trillion-or-more-per-year military (that's including all military-related costs), military spending will probably be gradually pared back. This will make for some hard choices, a less interventionist posture in general (already happening due to the experience of Iraq and Afghanistan), and possibly big changes to our traditional policy of providing security guarantees and "extended deterrence" as a way of discouraging nuclear proliferation. The big question is how much international conflict, disorder, and erosion of international regimes will follow from gradual US retrenchment.

That may sound like more than "not much." But whether one sees this constraint as highly consequential depends on how much benefit one thinks we are currently getting from our very large military spending (relative to other states), and how much reduction in US security you think would follow from our spending considerably less. In my view, the benefit-cost ratio of allocating spending away from the military and toward domestic priorities is most likely large and positive,

working group on foreign policy and grand strategy



particularly if money freed up by decreased pressure on the budget is not completely squandered (granted, not guaranteed). Of course, that assessment inevitably contains a lot of value judgments, on top of guesses about international consequences of a somewhat less forward US posture.

High levels of political polarization and gridlock in US national politics are obviously about domestic political issues rather than foreign policy. But what is essentially a low-threat international environment should be understood to be a permissive or enabling condition for our dysfunctional Congress.[1] If we faced threats on the order of Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, or Stalin's Soviet Union — and especially in a non-nuclear world — the debate over taxes and spending in Congress would be entirely different. Although there are some legitimately scary elements, nuclear terrorism in particular, our current security situation with respect to other states is highly benign. One consequence is that Congress is less likely to defer and delegate to the executive on foreign policy than was the case during the Cold War. This does open up more opportunities for foreign policy incoherence, as Congress, whose members are less likely to be blamed for foreign policy failures, responds to narrow priorities and constituencies different from the president's. But it also means that, on average, the consequences of incoherence and irresponsibility are less grave for our national security.

The area where I am most concerned about domestic political and bureaucratic constraints on the ability of the president to implement effective foreign policy is in the realm of homeland security. Nuclear and mass-casualty terrorism is a real and major threat. Even if it does not have high likelihood now because of the low technological capabilities of terrorist groups, this will change over time.

My impression is that we have been underinvesting in homeland defense relative to a more traditional, "offense is best" reflex: fighting multiple wars on foreign soil and, with the drone wars and arguments for preventive war to stop nuclear proliferation, moving in the direction of what might be called a Death Star foreign policy. Because political credit for invisible preventive measures is slight, we are spending too little on simple and low-cost securing of relatively easy infrastructure targets at home (e.g., chemical plants, water systems, transportation hubs, electrical power systems); on improved policies and methods of screening for radiological and other such devices; and on a more systematic approach to developing judicial institutions that reconcile the increased need for monitoring with rule of law, civil liberty, and privacy.

Even if we do spend more on homeland defense, this is an area where domestic political and bureaucratic constraints and obstacles to good policy appear particularly strong. Congress almost inevitably favors universalistic pork rather

than spending and programs targeted where they are most valuable. The federal homeland security bureaucracy is an ill-coordinated patchwork, and even if it were better coordinated the challenges of dealing with multiple state and local authorities in our federal system are enormous. And maybe most of all, congressional gridlock and polarization make the odds of constructive reform and redesign, or even systematic attention, low.

Perhaps implicit in the question is the concern that US economic troubles will constrain our ability to continue to pursue a "robust" foreign policy, where "robust" means interventionist, with a large military ranged against China at sea and prepared for more wars in the Middle East. In my view, by far the biggest reason to be concerned about inequality, low growth, persistent high levels of unemployment, and long-run government deficits is that these will negatively affect our economic and political welfare *at home in the United States*, not that these will constrain our ability to maintain national security or pursue a "robust" foreign policy.

Notes

1 This general idea is developed in Michael Desch, "War and Strong States, Peace and Weak States?" *International Organization*, Vol. 50, no. 2, spring 1996, pp. 237-268.

First printing 2014
19 18 17 16 15 14 13 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

About the Author

James D. Fearon
James D. Fearon is the Theodore and Frances Geballe Professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences, a professor of political science, and a Senior Fellow in the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, all at Stanford. His research interests include civil and interstate war, ethnic conflict, the international spread of democracy, and the evaluation of foreign aid projects' promoting improved governance.

Working Group on Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy

The certainties of the Cold War, such as they were, have disappeared. The United States now confronts several historically unique challenges, including the rise of a potential peer competitor, a rate of technological change unseen since the nineteenth century, the proliferation of nuclear and biological capabilities, and the possible joining of these capabilities with transnational terrorist movements. There has been no consensus on a grand strategy or even a set of principles to address specific problems. Reactive and ad hoc measures are not adequate.

The Hoover Institution's Working Group on Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy will explore an array of foreign policy topics over a two-year period. Our goal is to develop orienting principles about the most important policy challenges to better serve America's interests.

For more information about the Working Group on Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy, visit us online at www.hoover.org/taskforces/foreign-policy.

HOOVER INSTITUTION
STANFORD UNIVERSITY