

Saving Realism from the So-Called Realists

A foreign-policy approach based in security and pragmatism is now characterized by retrenchment and radicalism

By H. Brands & P. Feaver

The United States has entered an age of global turbulence. Great-power competition has returned with a vengeance; the world is being roiled by conflict and disorder. While inter-state violence has not returned to the peak levels seen in the last century, the security challenges facing American policymakers today are greater than at any time since the Cold War. The need for an intellectual discipline devoted to power politics and forging a stable international order is thus as pressing as ever. Realism—a school of thought traditionally focused on precisely these issues—should be having its moment in the sun.

And yet realism is currently in crisis.

Realism was once a sophisticated intellectual tradition that represented the best in American statecraft. Eminent Cold War realists were broadly supportive of America's postwar internationalism and its stabilizing role in global affairs, even as they stressed the need for prudence and restraint in employing U.S. power. Above all, Cold War-era realism was based on a hard-earned understanding that Americans must deal with the geopolitical realities as they are, rather than retreat to the false comfort provided by the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

More recently, however, those who call themselves realists have lost touch with this tradition. Within academia, realism has become synonymous with a preference for radical retrenchment and the deliberate destruction of arrangements that have fostered international stability and prosperity for decades. Within government, the Trump administration appears to be embracing an equally misguided version of realism—an approach that masquerades as shrewd realpolitik but is likely to prove profoundly damaging to American power and influence. Neither of these approaches is truly “realist,” as neither promotes core American interests or deals with the world as it really is. The United States surely needs the insights that an authentically realist approach to global affairs can provide. But first, American realism will have to undergo a reformation.

The Realist Tradition

Realism has taken many forms over the years, but it has always been focused on the imperatives of power, order, and survival in an anarchic global arena. The classical realists—Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes—considered how states and leaders should behave in a dangerous world in which there was no overarching morality or governing authority strong enough to regulate state behavior. The great modern realists—thinkers and statesmen such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, and Henry Kissinger—grappled with the same issues during and after the catastrophic upheaval that characterized the first half of the 20th century.

They argued that it was impossible to transcend the tragic nature of international politics through good intentions or moralistic maxims, and that seeking to do so would merely empower the most ruthless members of the international system. They contended, on the basis of bitter experience, that

aggression and violence were always a possibility in international affairs, and that states that desired peace would thus have to prepare for war and show themselves ready to wield coercive power. Most important, realist thinkers tended to place a high value on policies and arrangements that restrained potential aggressors and created a basis for stability within an inherently competitive global environment.

For this very reason, leading Cold War–era realists advocated a robust American internationalism as the best way of restraining malevolent actors and preventing another disastrous global crack-up—one that would inevitably reach out and touch the United States, just as the world wars had. Realist thinkers understood that America was uniquely capable of stabilizing the international order and containing Soviet power after World War II, even as they disagreed—sometimes sharply—over the precise nature and extent of American commitments. Moreover, although Cold War realists recognized the paramount role of power in international affairs, most also recognized that U.S. power would be most effective if harnessed to a compelling concept of American moral purpose and exercised primarily through enduring partnerships with nations that shared core American values. “An idealistic policy undisciplined by political realism is bound to be unstable and ineffective,” the political scientist Robert Osgood wrote. “Political realism unguided by moral purpose will be self-defeating and futile.” Most realists were thus sympathetic to the major initiatives of postwar foreign policy, such as the creation of U.S.-led military alliances and the cultivation of a thriving Western community composed primarily of liberal democracies.

At the same time, Cold War realists spoke of the need for American restraint. They worried that America’s liberal idealism, absent a sense of limits, would carry the country into quixotic crusades. They thought that excessive commitments at the periphery of the global system could weaken the international order against its radical challengers. They believed that a policy of outright confrontation toward the Kremlin could be quite dangerous. “Absolute security for one power means absolute insecurity for all others,” Kissinger wrote. Realists therefore advocated policies meant to temper American ambition and the most perilous aspects of superpower competition. They supported—and, in Kissinger’s case, led—arms-control agreements and political negotiations with Moscow. They often objected to America’s costliest interventions in the Third World. Kennan and Morgenthau were among the first mainstream figures to go public with opposition to American involvement in Vietnam (Morgenthau did so in the pages of *Commentary* in May 1962).

During the Cold War, then, realism was a supple, nuanced doctrine. It emphasized the need for balance in American statecraft—for energetic action blended with moderation, for hard-headed power politics linked to a regard for partnerships and values. It recognized that the United States could best mitigate the tragic nature of international relations by engaging with, rather than withdrawing from, an imperfect world.

This nuance has now been lost. Academics have applied the label of realism to dangerous and unrealistic policy proposals. More disturbing and consequential still, the distortion of realism seems to be finding a sympathetic hearing in the Trump White House.

Realism as Retrenchment

Consider the state of academic realism. Today’s most prominent self-identified realists—Stephen Walt, John Mearsheimer, Barry Posen, and Christopher Layne—advocate a thoroughgoing U.S. retrenchment from global affairs. Whereas Cold War realists were willing to see the world as it was—a world that required unequal burden-sharing and an unprecedented, sustained American

commitment to preserve international stability—academic realists now engage in precisely the wishful thinking that earlier realists deplored. They assume that the international order can essentially regulate itself and that America will not be threatened by—and can even profit from—a more unsettled world. They thus favor discarding the policies that have proven so successful over the decades in providing a congenial international climate.

Why has academic realism gone astray? If the Cold War brokered the marriage between realists and American global engagement, the end of the Cold War precipitated a divorce. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, U.S. policymakers continued to pursue an ambitious global agenda based on preserving and deepening both America's geopolitical advantage and the liberal international order. For many realists, however, the end of the Cold War removed the extraordinary threat—an expansionist USSR—that had led them to support such an agenda in the first place. Academic realists argued that the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s (primarily in the former Yugoslavia) reflected capriciousness rather than a prudent effort to deal with sources of instability. Similarly, they saw key policy initiatives—especially NATO enlargement and the Iraq war of 2003—as evidence that Washington was no longer behaving with moderation and was itself becoming a destabilizing force in global affairs.

These critiques were overstated, but not wholly without merit. The invasion and occupation of Iraq did prove far costlier than expected, as the academic realists had indeed warned. NATO expansion—even as it successfully promoted stability and liberal reform in Eastern Europe—did take a toll on U.S.–Russia relations. Having lost policy arguments that they thought they should have won, academic realists decided to throw the baby out with the bathwater, calling for a radical reformulation of America's broader grand strategy.

The realists' preferred strategy has various names—"offshore balancing," "restraint," etc.—but the key components and expectations are consistent. Most academic realists argue that the United States should pare back or eliminate its military alliances and overseas troop deployments, going back "onshore" only if a hostile power is poised to dominate a key overseas region. They call on Washington to forgo costly nation-building and counterinsurgency missions overseas and to downgrade if not abandon the promotion of democracy and human rights.

Academic realists argue that this approach will force local actors in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia to assume greater responsibility for their own security, and that the United States can manipulate—through diplomacy, arms sales, and covert action—the resulting rivalries and conflicts to prevent any single power from dominating a key region and thereby threatening the United States. Should these calculations prove faulty and a hostile power be poised to dominate, Washington can easily swoop in to set things aright, as it did during the world wars. Finally, if even *this* calculation were to prove faulty, realists argue that America can ride out the danger posed by a regional hegemon because the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and America's nuclear deterrent provide geopolitical immunity against existential threats.

Today's academic realists portray this approach as hard-headed, economical strategy. But in reality, it represents a stark departure from classical American realism. During the Cold War, leading realists placed importance on preserving international stability and heeded the fundamental lesson of World Wars I and II—that the United States, by dint of its power and geography, was the only actor that could anchor international arrangements. Today's academic realists essentially argue that the United States should dismantle the global architecture that has undergirded the international order—and that Washington can survive and even thrive amid the ensuing disorder. Cold War realists helped erect the

pillars of a peaceful and prosperous world. Contemporary academic realists advocate tearing down those pillars and seeing what happens.

The answer is “nothing good.” Contemporary academic realists sit atop a pyramid of faulty assumptions. They assume that one can remove the buttresses of the international system without that system collapsing, and that geopolitical burdens laid down by America will be picked up effectively by others. They assume that the United States does not need the enduring relationships that its alliances have fostered, and that it can obtain any cooperation it needs via purely transactional interactions. They assume that a world in which the United States ceases to promote liberal values will not be a world less congenial to America’s geopolitical interests. They assume that revisionist states will be mollified rather than emboldened by an American withdrawal, and that the transition from U.S. leadership to another global system will not unleash widespread conflict. Finally, they assume that if such upheaval does erupt, the United States can deftly manage and even profit from it, and that America can quickly move to restore stability at a reasonable cost should it become necessary to do so.

The founding generation of American realists had learned not to indulge in wishfully thinking that the international order would create or sustain itself, or that the costs of responding to rampant international disorder would be trivial. Today’s academic realists, by contrast, would stake everything on a leap into the unknown.

For many years, neither Democratic nor Republican policymakers were willing to make such a leap. Now, however, the Trump administration appears inclined to embrace its own version of foreign-policy realism, one that bears many similarities to—and contains many of the same liabilities as—the academic variant. One of the least academic presidents in American history may, ironically, be buying into some of the most misguided doctrines of the ivory tower.

Trumpian Realism

Any assessment of the Trump administration must remain somewhat provisional, given that Donald Trump’s approach to foreign policy is still a work in progress. Yet Trump and his administration have so far taken multiple steps to outline a three-legged-stool vision of foreign policy that they explicitly describe as “realist” in orientation. Like modern-day academic realism, however, this vision diverges drastically from the earlier tradition of American realism and leads to deeply problematic policy.

The first leg is President Trump’s oft-stated view of the international environment as an inherently zero-sum arena in which the gains of other countries are America’s losses. The post–World War II realists, by contrast, believed that the United States could enjoy positive-sum relations with like-minded nations. Indeed, they believed that America could not enjoy economic prosperity and national security unless its major trading partners in Europe and Asia were themselves prosperous and stable. The celebrated Marshall Plan was high-mindedly generous in the sense of addressing urgent humanitarian needs in Europe, yet policymakers very much conceived of it as serving America’s parochial economic and security interests at the same time. President Trump, however, sees a winner and loser in every transaction, and believes—with respect to allies and adversaries alike—that it is the United States who generally gets snookered. The “reality” at the core of Trump’s realism is his stated belief that America is exploited “by every nation in the world virtually.”

This belief aligns closely with the second leg of the Trump worldview: the idea that all foreign policy is explicitly competitive in nature. Whereas the Cold War realists saw a Western community of states,

President Trump apparently sees a dog-eat-dog world where America should view every transaction—even with allies—on a one-off basis. “The world is not a ‘global community’ but an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage,” wrote National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster and National Economic Council Director Gary Cohn in an op-ed. “Rather than deny this elemental nature of international affairs, we embrace it.”

To be sure, Cold War realists were deeply skeptical about “one worldism” and appeals to a global community. But still they saw the United States and its allies as representing the “free world,” a community of common purpose forged in the battle against totalitarian enemies. The Trump administration seems to view U.S. partnerships primarily on an ad hoc basis, and it has articulated something akin to a “what have you done for me lately” approach to allies. The Cold War realists—who understood how hard it was to assemble effective alliances in the first place—would have found this approach odd in the extreme.

Finally, there is the third leg of Trump’s “realism”: an embrace of amorality. President Trump has repeatedly argued that issues such as the promotion of human rights and democracy are merely distractions from “winning” in the international arena and a recipe for squandering scarce resources. On the president’s first overseas trip to the Middle East in May, for instance, he promised not to “lecture” authoritarian countries on their internal behavior, and he made clear his intent to embrace leaders who back short-term U.S. foreign-policy goals no matter how egregious their violations of basic human rights and political freedoms. Weeks later, on a visit to Poland, the president did speak explicitly about the role that shared values played in the West’s struggle against Communism during the Cold War, and he invoked “the hope of every soul to live in freedom.” Yet his speech contained only the most cursory reference to Russia—the authoritarian power now undermining democratic governance and security throughout Europe and beyond. Just as significant, Trump failed to mention that Poland itself—until a few years ago, a stirring exemplar of successful transition from totalitarianism to democracy—is today sliding backwards toward illiberalism (as are other countries within Europe and the broader free world).

At first glance, this approach might seem like a modern-day echo of Cold War debates about whether to back authoritarian dictators in the struggle against global Communism. But, as Jeane Kirkpatrick explained in her famous 1979 Commentary essay “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” and as Kissinger himself frequently argued, Cold War realists saw such tactical alliances of convenience as being in the service of a deeper values-based goal: the preservation of an international environment favoring liberty and democracy against the predations of totalitarianism. Moreover, they understood that Americans would sustain the burdens of global leadership over a prolonged period only if motivated by appeals to their cherished ideals as well as their concrete interests. Trump, for his part, has given only faint and sporadic indications of any appreciation of the traditional role of values in American foreign policy.

Put together, these three elements have profound, sometimes radical, implications for America’s approach to a broad range of global issues. Guided by this form of realism, the Trump administration has persistently chastised and alienated long-standing democratic allies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific and moved closer to authoritarians in Saudi Arabia, China, and the Philippines. The president’s body language alone has been striking: Trump’s summits have repeatedly showcased conviviality with dictators and quasi-authoritarians and painfully awkward interactions with democratic leaders such as Germany’s Angela Merkel. Similarly, Trump has disdained international agreements and institutions that do not deliver immediate, concrete benefits for the United States, even if they are critical to forging international cooperation on key issues or advancing longer-term goods. As Trump has put it,

he means to promote the interests of Pittsburgh, not Paris, and he believes that those interests are inherently at odds with each other.

To be fair, President Trump and his proxies do view the war on terror as a matter of defending both American security interests and Western civilization's values against the jihadist onslaught. This was a key theme of Trump's major address in Warsaw. Yet the administration has not explained how this civilizational mindset would inform any other aspect of its foreign policy—with the possible exception of immigration policy—and resorts far more often to the parochial lens of nationalism.

The Trump administration seems to be articulating a vision in which America has no lasting friends, little enduring concern with values, and even less interest in cultivating a community of like-minded nations that exists for more than purely deal-making purposes. The administration has often portrayed this as clear-eyed realism, even invoking the founding father of realism, Thucydides, as its intellectual lodestar. This approach does bear some resemblance to classical realism: an unsentimental approach to the world with an emphasis on the competitive aspects of the international environment. And insofar as Trump dresses down American allies, rejects the importance of values, and focuses on transactional partnerships, his version of realism has quite a lot in common with the contemporary academic version.

Daniel Drezner of Tufts University has noted the overlap, declaring in a *Washington Post* column, "This is [academic] realism's moment in the foreign policy sun." Randall Schweller of Ohio State University, an avowed academic realist and Trump supporter, has been even more explicit, noting approvingly that "Trump's foreign-policy approach essentially falls under the rubric of 'off-shore balancing'" as promoted by ivory-tower realists in recent decades.

Yet one suspects that the American realists who helped create the post-World War II order would not feel comfortable with either the academic or Trumpian versions of realism as they exist today. For although both of these approaches purport to be about power and concrete results, both neglect the very things that have allowed the United States to use its power so effectively in the past.

Both the academic and Trump versions of realism ignore the fact that U.S. power is most potent when it is wielded in concert with a deeply institutionalized community of like-minded nations. Alliances are less about addition and subtraction—the math of the burden-sharing emphasized by Trump and the academic realists—and more about multiplication, leveraging U.S. power to influence world events at a fraction of the cost of unilateral approaches. The United States would be vastly less powerful and influential in Europe and Central Asia without NATO; it would encounter far greater difficulties in rounding up partners to wage the ongoing war in Afghanistan or defeat the Islamic State; it would find itself fighting alone—rather than with some of the world's most powerful partners—far more often. Likewise, without its longstanding treaty allies in Asia, the United States would be at an almost insurmountable disadvantage vis-à-vis revisionist powers in that region, namely China.

Both versions of realism also ignore the fact that America has been able to exercise its enormous power with remarkably little global resistance precisely because American leaders, by and large, have paid sufficient regard to the opinions of potential partners. Of course, every administration has sought to "put America first," but the pursuit of American self-interest has proved most successful when it enjoys the acquiescence of other states. Likewise, the academic and Trump versions of realism too frequently forget that America draws power by supporting values with universal appeal. This is why every American president from Franklin Roosevelt to Barack Obama has recognized that a more

democratic world is likely to be one that is both ideologically and geopolitically more congenial to the United States.

Most important, both the academic and Trump versions of realism ignore the fact that the classical post–World War II realists deliberately sought to overcome the dog-eat-dog world that modern variants take as a given. They did so by facilitating cooperation within the free world, suppressing the security competitions that had previously led to cataclysmic wars, creating the basis for a thriving international economy, and thereby making life a little less nasty, brutish, and short for Americans as well as for vast swaths of the world’s population.

If realism is about maximizing power, effectiveness, and security in a competitive global arena, then neither the academic nor the Trump versions of realism merits the name. And if realism is meant to reflect the world as it is, both of these versions are deeply deficient.

This is a tragedy. For if ever there were a moment for an informed realism, it would be now, as the strategic horizon darkens and a more competitive international environment reemerges. There is still time for Trump and his team to adapt, and realism can still make a constructive contribution to American policy. But first it must rediscover its roots—and absorb the lessons of the past 70 years.

The Seven Pillars of Realism

A reformed realism should be built upon seven bedrock insights, which President Trump would do well to embrace.

First, American leadership remains essential to restraining global disorder. Today’s realists channel the longstanding American hope that there would come a time when the United States could slough off the responsibilities it assumed after World War II and again become a country that relies on its advantageous geography to keep the world at arm’s length. Yet realism compels an awareness that America is exceptionally suited to the part it has played for nearly four generations. The combination of its power, geographic location, and values has rendered America uniquely capable of providing a degree of global order in a way that is more reassuring than threatening to most of the key actors in the international system. Moreover, given that today the most ambitious and energetic international actors besides the United States are not liberal democracies but aggressive authoritarian powers, an American withdrawal is unlikely to produce multipolar peace. Instead, it is likely to precipitate the upheaval that U.S. engagement and activism have long been meant to avert. As a corollary, realists must also recognize that the United States is unlikely to thrive amid such upheaval; it will probably find that the disorder spreads and ultimately implicates vital American interests, as was twice the case in the first half of the 20th century.

Second, true realism recognizes the interdependence of hard and soft power. In a competitive world, there is no substitute for American hard power, and particularly for military muscle. Without guns, there will not—over the long term—be butter. But military power, by itself, is an insufficient foundation for American strategy. A crude reliance on coercion will damage American prestige and credibility in the end; hard power works best when deployed in the service of ideas and goals that command widespread international approval. Similarly, military might is most effective when combined with the “softer” tools of development assistance, foreign aid, and knowledge of foreign societies and cultures. The Trump administration has sought to eviscerate these nonmilitary capabilities and bragged about its “hard-power budget”; it would do better to understand that a balance between hard and soft power is essential.

Third, values are an essential part of American realism. Of course, the United States must not undertake indiscriminate interventions in the name of democracy and human rights. But, fortunately, no serious policymaker—not Woodrow Wilson, not Jimmy Carter, not George W. Bush—has ever embraced such a doctrine. What most American leaders *have* traditionally recognized is that, on balance, U.S. interests will be served and U.S. power will be magnified in a world in which democracy and human rights are respected. Ronald Reagan, now revered for his achievements in improving America’s global position, understood this point and made the selective promotion of democracy—primarily through nonmilitary means—a key part of his foreign policy. While paying due heed to the requirements of prudence and the limits of American power, then, American realists should work to foster a climate in which those values can flourish.

Fourth, a reformed realism requires aligning relations with the major powers appropriately—especially today, as great-power tensions rise. That means appreciating the value of institutions that have bound the United States to some of the most powerful actors in the international system for decades and thereby given Washington leadership of the world’s dominant geopolitical coalition. It means not taking trustworthy allies for granted or picking fights with them gratuitously. It also means *not* treating actual adversaries, such as Vladimir Putin’s Russia, as if they were trustworthy partners (as Trump has often talked of doing) or as if their aggressive behavior were simply a defensive response to American provocations (as many academic realists have done). A realistic approach to American foreign policy begins by seeing great-power relations through clear eyes.

Fifth, limits are essential. Academic realists are wrong to suggest that values should be excised from U.S. policy; they are wrong to argue that the United States should pull back dramatically from the world. Yet they are right that good statecraft requires an understanding of limits—particularly for a country as powerful as the United States, and particularly at a time when the international environment is becoming more contested. The United States cannot right every wrong, fix every problem, or defend every global interest. America can and should, however, shoulder more of the burden than modern academic and Trumpian realists believe. The United States will be effective only if it chooses its battles carefully; it will need to preserve its power for dealing with the most pressing threat to its national interests and the international order—the resurgence of authoritarian challenges—even if that means taking an economy-of-force approach to other issues.

Sixth, realists must recognize that the United States has not created and sustained a global network of alliances, international institutions, and other embedded relationships out of a sense of charity. It has done so because those relationships provide forums through which the United States can exercise power at a bargain-basement price. Embedded relationships have allowed the United States to rally other nations to support American causes from the Korean War to the counter-ISIS campaign, and have reduced the transaction costs of collective action to meet common threats from international terrorism to piracy. They have provided institutional megaphones through which the United States can amplify its diplomatic voice and project its influence into key issues and regions around the globe. If these arrangements did not exist, the United States would find itself having to create them, or acting unilaterally at far greater cost. If realism is really about maximizing American power, true realists ought to be enthusiastic about relationships and institutions that serve that purpose. Realists should adopt the approach that every post-Cold War president has embraced: that the United States will act unilaterally in defense of its interests when it must, but multilaterally with partners whenever it can.

Finally, realism requires not throwing away what has worked in the past. One of the most astounding aspects of both contemporary academic realism and the Trumpian variant of that tradition

is the cavalier attitude they display toward arrangements and partnerships that have helped produce a veritable golden age of international peace, stability, and liberalism since World War II, and that have made the United States the most influential and effective actor in the globe in the process. Of course, there have been serious and costly conflicts over the past decades, and U.S. policy has always been thoroughly imperfect. But the last 70 years have been remarkably good ones for U.S. interests and the global order—whether one compares them with the 70 years before the United States adopted its global leadership role, or compares them with the violent disorder that would have emerged if America followed the nostrums peddled today under the realist label. A doctrine that stresses that importance of prudence and discretion, and that was originally conservative in its preoccupation with stability and order, ought not to pursue radical changes in American statecraft or embrace a “come what may” approach to the world. Rather, such a doctrine ought to recognize that true achievements are enormously difficult to come by—and that the most realistic approach to American strategy would thus be to focus on keeping a good thing going.
