

## **GRAND STRATEGY IN A FRACTURED MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In theory, grand strategies should benefit from a robust marketplace of foreign policy ideas, in which experts can critique and improve upon the status quo. There is growing evidence, however, that in practice this marketplace has shifted in ways that make the sustainable articulation of grand strategies more difficult. This chapter reviews these shifts and considers how they weaken the ability of foreign policy elites to influence grand strategy. The erosion of trust in expertise, increase in political polarization, and weakening of legislative interest in grand strategy have degraded the ability of experts to proffer new ideas and critique alternatives. These trends ensure that the lifespan of each grand strategy has been shortened, reducing their utility.

**KEYWORDS:** marketplace of ideas, polarization, expertise, grand strategy

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## Introduction

Grand strategy is an attempt to marry state capabilities with social purpose. It is an intentional act of intellectual creation, guiding foreign actors, national security bureaucracies, and outside analysts about what to expect from a country's foreign policy (Drezner 2009). In theory, democracies possess an advantage in the formulation of grand strategies. Because democratic governments foster a vigorous marketplace of ideas, foreign policy elites should act as powerful critics to referee any nascent foreign policy ideas. Indeed, current debates about grand strategy have fostered a wider variety of voices than usual entering the fray (Hurlburt 2019; Goldgeier 2019). Furthermore, for grand strategies to matter, they must be clear and enduring. The ability of democracies to credibly commit should enhance the signaling power of articulated foreign policy doctrines (Cowhey 1993).

There are signs, however, that the half-life of democratic grand strategies has been shrinking. The first U.S. grand strategy of isolationism lasted more than a century. Its most prominent grand strategy, containment, lasted less than a half-century. The post-Cold War strategy of primacy lasted only a quarter-century. Strategies need to adapt to shifts in external circumstances, but the acceleration of change cannot be denied. Nor is this limited to the United States. Countries ranging from Great Britain to South Korea have had gyrating grand strategies over the past decade.

This chapter warns that shifts in the marketplace for foreign policy ideas render grand strategy debates in advanced industrialized democracies less significant and more superfluous. Three factors have lowered the utility of these debates. First, the erosion of trust in expertise in general and foreign policy expertise in particular has reduced the influence of foreign policy establishments. Second, the rise in political polarization has had pronounced effects on foreign policy discourse, making it harder for foreign policy intellectuals in one party to persuade elites across the political aisle. Third, decades of dysfunction and disinterest have led legislatures to cede an ever-greater share of foreign policy powers to the executive branch. The reduction of legislative influence weakens a veto point in which public debate could affect choices about grand strategy.

These trends reduce the ability of foreign policy elites to fashion a sustainable grand strategy. The erosion of trust in elites weakens expert influence on strategic debates. Political polarization severely degrades the ability of parliaments to participate constructively on foreign policy. At the same time, polarization has led to the election of foreign policy leaders governing from the more extreme wings of the ideological spectrum. Grand strategies will oscillate between the parties in power, with little in the way of constancy. Credible commitments will be next to impossible to maintain. The ability to learn from past mistakes will be degraded. All of these trends reduce the ability of foreign policy elites to fashion a sustainable grand strategy. Whatever grand strategy is articulated, actual foreign policy outputs will be independent of that strategy.

## Grand strategy and the marketplace of ideas

In theory, a country's grand strategy can and should be disciplined through the marketplace of ideas. Kaufmann (2004, p. 5) notes, "the marketplace of ideas helps to weed out unfounded, mendacious, or self-serving foreign policy arguments because their proponents cannot avoid wide-ranging debate in which their reasoning and evidence are subject to public scrutiny." In the absence of such a debate, policymakers and publics can fall victim to myths and misperceptions, which in turn contribute to catastrophic strategic errors (Janis 1982; Snyder 1991). An unheralded virtue of foreign policy intellectuals is to vigorously push back on bad ideas (Nichols 2017; Drezner 2017, 2019b).

Foreign policy elites are a pivotal audience for grand strategies. Government officials are the principal architects of strategy but they are publicized and vetted through outside experts. These intellectuals function as a check against the implementation of bad ideas. While falling short of the definition of an "epistemic community" (Haas 1992), foreign policy elites nonetheless can act as a constraint on policymakers if they deviate from that consensus. Traditionally, politicians who proposed ideas rejected by an expert consensus – as when the Obama administration proposed quantitative restrictions on G20 trade deficits – paid a political price for that rejection.

At the onset of the Cold War, foreign policy experts played a vital role in interrogating U.S. grand strategies. The acme of the foreign policy community was the "Georgetown Set" that debated grand strategy over Washington dinners (Herken 2014). This coterie of academics, columnists, and policymakers was small enough to exercise real leverage over the marketplace of ideas. Most of them had gone to the same schools and served together in the Second World War. This common background helped them trust each other even when they disagreed. George Kennan's direct influence over politicians and policy principals was small. The one arena where he did exercise influence, however, was over the Georgetown set (Miscamble 1992, p. 36; Herken 2014, p. 51). Those opinion writers cemented Kennan's reputation for foreign policy *gravitas* in the public's mind (Gaddis 2011, p. 270-75).

Although the range of foreign policy opinions within the Georgetown Set was narrow (Anderson 2015), there were substantive debates about methods and scope. The defining debate occurred between George Kennan and Walter Lippmann. In "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," Kennan (1947) advocated for a robust policy of containment towards the Soviet Union. Lippmann (1947) responded to Kennan's *Foreign Affairs* essay with a series of critical columns that eventually warned into *The Cold War*. Lippmann's *realpolitik* response was the most high-profile contemporaneous rebuttal to Kennan. Their debate demarcated the boundaries of Cold War discourse for the next four decades.

A key dynamic during this era was the push and pull between different wings of the foreign policy establishment. A rough equilibrium emerged between those who wanted the country to adopt a more interventionist posture and those who wanted to husband national power for critical junctures; between those who preferred multilateral approaches and those who preferred unilateral ones. When one camp overreached, others would seize on it to call for a course correction. Advocates of restraint invoked the excesses of Vietnam to push for retrenchment. Hawks pointed to Soviet expansionism in the 1970s to argue for a more robust posture. The

partially decentralized policymaking process during this era meant that no one foreign policy camp accrued too much influence (Mead 2002, p. 95). When the Nixon White House pursued a strictly *realpolitik* approach toward the Soviet Union, for example, Congress forced human rights concerns onto the agenda. Time and time again, foreign policy reverted to the mean. Activism was eventually followed by restraint. The results of these cross-cutting debates were far from perfect, but they ensured that U.S. foreign policy did not deviate too far from containment. Past commitments remained credible in the future.

The collapse of the Soviet Union rendered containment obsolete. U.S. officials “looked to the academy for ideas” (Byman and Kroenig 2016, p. 309). This sparked serious intellectual efforts to devise a grand strategy for the post-Cold War world. A number of foreign policy intellectuals stepped forward to offer new ways of thinking about world politics. Some of these worldviews were optimistic about U.S. hegemony (Fukuyama 1989; Krauthammer 1990/91; Nye 1990); others were gloomier (Mearsheimer 1990; Huntington 1993b). Scholars debated the prospect of an expanding democratic peace (Brown, Lynn-Jones, and Miller 1996). Another debate raged over the durability and stability of American hegemony on world politics (Jervis 1993; Huntington 1993a).

America’s post-Cold War grand strategy converged on the maintenance of primacy and the enlargement of a U.S.-led liberal internationalism. Grand strategists embraced the optimistic assessments of Fukuyama and Nye and rejected the pessimistic assessments of Huntington and Mearsheimer about the future trajectory of American power. Even a policymaker as realist as Brent Scowcroft wrote in a 1989 memo to President George H.W. Bush, “When those creators of the 1940s and 1950s rested, they had done much. We now have unprecedented opportunities to do more, to pick up the task where they left off, while doing what must be done to protect a handsome inheritance (quoted in G. Rose 2019, p. 16).”

The power of foreign policy elites in the post-Cold War era seemed to match the influence of their predecessors during the Cold War period. Jacobs and Page (2005, p. 113) demonstrate that the preferences of key elite groups had a much stronger effect on policymakers than the broad public during this period. The correlation of preferences between elites and policymakers was so strong that they concluded the “foreign policy establishment” still dominated the discourse during the post-Cold War era.

### **The establishment weakens**

Some observers argue that America’s foreign policy community – the very definition of an unelected establishment – is *too* influential. The one thing that united presidents Obama and Trump was their disdain for foreign policy elites inside the Beltway (Drezner 2017, p. 4-8). Analysts argue that the post-Cold War grand strategy was too cosseting, muting debate and leading to catastrophic foreign policy decisions. Obama’s deputy national security advisor Ben Rhodes referred derisively to the foreign policy community inside the Beltway as “The Blob.” He vented that, “The discourse in Washington just becomes like a self-licking ice cream cone of maximalist foreign policy (Drezner 2017, p. 4-5).” Multiple critics of the primacy grand strategy

argued that the foreign policy establishment constricted the marketplace of ideas in foreign policy (Kaufmann 2004; Friedman and Logan 2016). According to Porter (2018, p. 16):

They socialize personnel into their worldview, educating and selecting individuals who conform, excluding or penalizing those who do not, and linking conformity to an axiomatic worldview with insider status; they also dominate the pool of experienced talent that makes up officialdom. They have privileged access to power via an institutional revolving door, a set of social networks, and institutions—the locations where grand strategic ideas intervene at the unit level.... The Blob dominates public discourse and sets its agenda, through privileged access to the commentariat, of which it forms a part.

Porter pointed to President Trump's first year in office as a case study of a populist candidate constrained by a foreign policy team that emanated from the Blob. The occasional disjuncture between Trump and the doctrines produced by his administration was readily observable (Woodward 2018).

The implicit critique in these analyses is that the marketplace of ideas has not functioned as advertised. There is little evidence that intellectuals are punished for past errors in judgment (Silver 2012; Drezner 2017), and this is decidedly true for foreign policy elites. The architects of the Vietnam War were subsequently praised as the "Wise Men" (Isaacson and Thomas 1986). The architects of the 2003 invasion of Iraq paid little price for that gambit. Among members of the foreign policy community, support for both the wars in Vietnam and Iraq were high. Leslie Gelb (2009, p. 24) admitted that his support for the 2003 Iraq War, "was symptomatic of unfortunate tendencies within the foreign policy community, namely the disposition and incentives to support wars to retain political and professional credibility." Others argue that these debates have largely been disconnected from the foreign policy preferences of the American people. The gap between an interventionist foreign policy elite and a public that leans more towards restraint has been striking (Page and Bouton 2006).

While foreign policy elites may not have paid a material price for mistakes, empirical claims about the power of the Blob have not held up well either. At the rhetorical level, Trump has categorically rejected the liberal internationalism of his predecessors, as have his key foreign policy subordinates. In his inaugural address, Trump (2017a) explicitly stated, "We've defended other nation's borders while refusing to defend our own, and spent trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay." The Trump administration's first national security strategy (Trump 2017b) emphasized foreign economic threats to a greater extent than any previous grand strategy. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (2018) derided the very idea of multilateral institutions, saying "Multilateralism has too often become viewed as an end unto itself. The more treaties we sign, the safer we supposedly are. The more bureaucrats we have, the better the job gets done. Was that ever really true?" Trump's former NSC spokesperson Michael Anton (2019), in attempting to articulate a Trump Doctrine, wrote, "Let's all put our own countries first, and be candid about it, and recognize that it's nothing to be ashamed of. Putting our interests first will make us all safer and more prosperous. If there is a Trump Doctrine, that's it." None of this rhetoric is consistent with the post-Cold War grand strategy of liberal internationalism (Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007).

Trump's personnel and policy moves match his rhetoric. By 2019 Trump had replaced all of the people Porter (2018) had identified as members of the foreign policy establishment. In his December 2018 resignation letter, Secretary of Defense James Mattis made it clear that the reason for his departure was a disagreement over U.S. grand strategy: "We must do everything possible to advance an international order that is most conducive to our security, prosperity and values, and we are strengthened in this effort by the solidarity of our alliances. Because you have the right to a Secretary of Defense whose views are better aligned with yours on these and other subjects, I believe it is right for me to step down from my position." In their stead, Trump appointed policy principals who were much more unilateralist in their worldview. Over time, the Trump administration's policy actions have reflected a grand strategy far closer to "America First" than liberal internationalism. On issues ranging from climate change to nonproliferation to trade policy his administration deviated significantly from the post-Cold War consensus.

The inchoate aspects of this administration's grand strategy might help to explain the meager outcomes that an "America First" approach has yielded to date (Drezner 2019c), but that does not mean the strategic shift has abated – if anything, the opposite is true. Most of Trump's foreign policy moves generated vigorous criticism from across the foreign policy community (Posen 2018; Haass 2019; G. Rose 2019). Nonetheless, there has been little to no effect on administration actions and strategies. *Contra* Porter, today's foreign policy elite have been nowhere near as influential as George Kennan and Paul Nitze. What explains this shift from the heyday of Kennan and Lippmann?

### **The erosion of trust in elites**

There are three reasons that foreign policy experts exert less influence over the marketplace of ideas. The first is the general erosion of trust in authority and expertise. The survey data showing rising levels of pessimism towards major institutions and professions is incontrovertible. Over the past half-century there has been an erosion of public trust in almost every major public institution. Vietnam and Watergate cut Americans' trust in government by half over a single decade. Pew (2019) data shows that between the immediate post-9/11 moment and March 2019, the percentage of Americans who trust the federal government fell from 54 percent to 17 percent. After examining the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, Ross and Kehoe (2018) concluded, "The public's confidence in the traditional structures of American leadership is now fully undermined and has been replaced with a strong sense of fear, uncertainty and disillusionment." Gallup data reveals that Americans have lost faith in most institutions: local police, unions, public schools, organized religion, business, and the health care system. Indeed, at no time in the past decade has the bulk of the institutions polled yielded trust levels higher than the historical average. Similarly, trust in most major sources of information – including television news and newspapers – is also at an all-time low.

Survey data on public confidence in U.S. foreign policy elites does not exist, but it is easy to infer from other data that distrust in this kind of expertise has likely increased. The General Social Survey has polled Americans for confidence in institutions associated with learning and knowledge: the scientific community, medicine, education, and organized religion. In 1974, the

average confidence level for these institutions peaked at approximately 50%. By 2012, confidence in all four of these institutions had dropped to an average of 31% (Smith and Son 2013). Americans are also more open to alternative belief systems that experts had largely discredited. On a host of scientific issues, ranging from climate change to child vaccines, public distrust and skepticism has persisted (Ricci 2015). And in politics, the public holds views that are significantly different from the consensus of political scientists (Caplan et al 2013).

The erosion of trust in authority extends well beyond the United States. Within the advanced industrialized economies, trust in government fell by roughly ten percentage points between 2007 and 2012 (OECD 2013). Edelman's (2015) survey revealed that "the number of countries with trusted institutions has fallen to an all-time low among the informed public." Faith in democracy as a form of government is also eroding across the advanced, industrialized world (Foa and Mounk 2016).

Indeed, the erosion of trust in elites defined the Brexit debate. In the run-up to the 2016 referendum, the IMF, OECD, Bank of England, Federal Reserve, Price Waterhouse Coopers, Barclays, Moody's, and the Economist Intelligence Unit all issued reports warning that the costs of Brexit would be significant. When asked about these analyses, Michael Gove, a leader of the Leave campaign, responded confidently, "I'm glad these organizations aren't on my side." He continued: "I think people in this country have had enough of experts (Colville 2016)." A Conservative MP told the *Financial Times* (Buck 2016) that "there is a fundamental breakdown in trust not just between voters and politicians but also with the BBC, the Bank of England, the City of London, and so on." A majority of British voters favored Brexit by distrusting experts.

Some healthy skepticism of experts is warranted, especially given the scandals that have plagued elite institutions over the past decade (Hayes 2012; Drezner 2017). The effect of too much skepticism on the marketplace of ideas is corrosive, however. As Teles, Hurlburt, and Schmitt (2014, p. 47) note, the authority of elites and their institutions was attacked from the left in the 1960s and from the right in the 1970s. As a result, "the country lost the mediating power that these institutions had over public discourse, and in particular their ability to certify basic claims of fact." Hayes (2012, p. 13 and 25) observes that "We now operate in a world in which we can assume neither competence nor good faith from the authorities" and warned, "if the experts as a whole are discredited, we are faced with an inexhaustible supply of quackery." Nichols (2017, p. 216) concludes, "The relationship between experts and citizens, like almost all relationships in a democracy, is built on trust. When that trust collapses, experts and laypeople become warring factions."

The general erosion of trust in expertise has pronounced effects on the marketplace for ideas in grand strategy. Foreign policy elites possess genuine expertise, but much of their power in public discourse has traditionally come from their credentials – prestigious degrees, endowed chairs, fellowships, and sinecures in media outlets. Arguing from authority, however, only works if the authority is recognized and legitimized by others. In a world in which traditional accreditations do not carry the same prestige, foreign policy experts must work harder to make their voices heard above the din. The erosion of trust levels the playing field in the public sphere by calling into doubt the value of foreign policy expertise in the first place. Lowered barriers to entry permit individuals who lack traditional credentials to participate in public debates about

grand strategy. Furthermore, new entrants can advance their arguments in part by bashing the pre-existing consensus on grand strategy (Drezner 2017). They can exploit narratives about failed foreign policies of the past to argue that they can hardly be expected to do worse.

During the 2016 campaign, Donald Trump told voters at one rally (Nichols 2017, p. 210-11), “The experts are terrible. They say, ‘Donald Trump needs a foreign policy advisor.’... But supposing I don’t have one. Would it be worse than what we’re doing now?” His foreign policy acolytes made the same argument in articulating a populist approach to foreign policy. Indeed, the 2017 National Security Strategy (Trump 2017b, p. 3) explicitly criticized prior grand strategies, arguing that great power competition would “require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades — policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false.” Such criticism of prior grand strategies was not a feature of any prior NSS. The style befits the devalued worth assigned to establishment foreign policy experts.

### **The rise of political polarization**

The erosion of trust in expertise intersects with another trend that further devalues foreign policy expertise: the rise in political polarization. The evidence for this in the United States is incontrovertible. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) have shown that over the past four decades the average Democratic member of Congress has moved leftwards, and the average Republican member of Congress has moved further rightwards. Other measures of partisan conflict show that the increase in political polarization goes beyond elected officials. For both Democrats and Republicans, party elites have become more ideologically extreme than the broader party membership (Bafumi and Herron 2010). Indeed, political elites are now more ideologically extreme than at any time in postwar history. As one Pew survey (Dimock et al 2014, p. 6) concludes, “divisions are greatest among those who are the most engaged and active in the political process.” Even the data produced by polarization skeptics show that political polarization among the mass public has been on the increase since the turn of this century (Garner and Palmer 2011; Hill and Tausanovitch 2015).

There is considerable evidence showing that partisans on one side increasingly dislike and distrust partisans on the other side. Party activists now report that they dislike the other party’s activists more than they did a generation ago (Shaw 2012). Between 1994 and 2014, the percentage of Republicans and Democrats who believe that the other party is “a threat to the nation’s well-being” has more than doubled (Dimock et al 2014). Compared to thirty years ago, they also believe that the other party’s members are less intelligent. One recent experimental study concluded that Americans discriminated more based on political partisanship than on either race or gender (Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

As the Brexit debacle suggests, there has been an increase in political extremism across Europe as well. The Tories moved to the right to accommodate Brexit while Labor moved further to the left. Large European economies experienced a surge in nationalist populist parties: the National Front in France, Law and Justice in Poland, and AfD in Germany. Stagnating eurozone



economies witnessed the rise of economically populist parties: Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, and the Five-Star Movement in Italy.

The effect of polarization on the perception of foreign policy ideas in the United States has been considerable. It was often posited that foreign policy was the last preserve of bipartisanship, but Senate data show that by 2001, there was even more polarization on foreign affairs vote than domestic policy votes (Jeong and Quirk 2019). As Kupchan and Trubowitz (2007, p. 9) argue: “The polarization of the United States has dealt a severe blow to the bipartisan compact between power and cooperation. Instead of adhering to the vital center, the country’s elected officials, along with the public, are backing away from the liberal internationalist compact, supporting either U.S. power or international cooperation, but rarely both.” Multiple analyses demonstrate that public and elite support for the liberal internationalist consensus has frayed badly (Busby and Monten 2008; Milner and Tingley 2011). Consistent with that conclusion, the bifurcation of American foreign policy is evident in public opinion polls. Across a wide array of foreign policy questions – climate change, counterterrorism, immigration, the Middle East, and the use of force – U.S. public attitudes are polarized (Smeltz et al 2015).

Polarization makes it difficult for foreign policy elites to affect grand strategy debates. Guisinger and Saunders (2017) ran survey experiments to see how the public responded to views from elites on an array of foreign policy questions. They found an expert consensus could alter public attitudes on issues where the public was not already polarized. When the public was already split along partisan lines, as with climate change, polarization rendered elite cues worse than useless. Expert opinions from out-of-party sources simply made respondents double down on their pre-existing positions. Greater polarization imposes a tighter constraint on the ability of foreign policy experts to influence public attitudes.

Another problem with political polarization is that it makes it difficult for learning to take place (Schultz 2018). For grand strategies to improve, there has to be agreement on what failed and the lessons drawn from those failures (Brands and Edel 2019). This requires a consensus on the “stylized facts” (Hirschman 2016). The rise of political polarization means that not everyone will accept a common set of stylized facts even if there is a consensus among intellectuals. Some partisans will have a persistent incentive to craft arguments around facts not in evidence to support their foreign policy leader. As a result, in many areas of foreign policy there is no consensus about the stylized facts or common narratives that ordinarily frame a debate (Lepore 2019). For example, all available global public opinion data shows a significant deterioration in U.S. soft power since the election of Donald Trump (A. Rose 2019). Nonetheless, when Americans are polled on this question, Republican respondents insisted that the U.S. is more respected in the world now that Trump is president.

Polarization is also weakening reservoirs of expertise within the foreign policy and national security bureaucracy. Both outside observers (Lewis 2018; Farrow 2018) and inspector general reports (Office of the Inspector General 2019a, 2019b) confirm that Trump administration officials overtly sought to purge bureaucracies of career professionals thought to be politically suspect. In the first week of the Trump administration, the White House forced several senior career ambassadors out of their positions, a move Farrow (2018, p. ix) labeled the “Mahogany Row massacre.” Trump’s first State Department policy planning director permitted conservative

media attacks to prune out career diplomats believed to be sympathetic to Obama-era policies (Office of the Inspector General 2019b). One diplomat was told that a Trump appointee would oppose any Foreign Service officers for leadership positions unless they passed the “Breitbart test,” in reference to the online outlet that espouses populist nationalism (Zeya 2018). Multiple career ambassadors resigned; one of them went on the record to warn about the “complete and utter disdain for our expertise” among Trump’s political appointees (Cohen 2017). This was confirmed in January 2019, during which a senior Trump official penned an anonymous op-ed praising the extended government shutdown because it allowed political appointees to “weed out the saboteurs” (Drezner 2019a, p. 728). The effect of these attacks has been to erode the influence of career foreign policy experts across the bureaucracy. At the State Department, for example, departures from the Foreign Service increased, entry applications plummeted, and morale across the department fell (Stephenson 2017; Farrow 2018; Drezner 2019a).

### **The enervation of legislatures**

The final trend that weakens the foreign policy establishment is the degrading of checks and balances on the executive branch’s management of foreign policy. This phenomenon is evident in parliamentary democracies but is most visible in the United States. The U.S. Constitution gives the legislative branch significant foreign policy powers, including the ability to declare war, set tariffs, and ratify treaties. Over time, however, the president has accrued unchecked operational authority over foreign policy (Schlesinger 1973, Rudalevige 2005). Azari (2019) points out that “the structure of the government puts the president in a position to both make decisions and articulate them in a way that Congress rarely can.... The government structure created by the Constitution allows the president a great deal of power and flexibility.”

The other branches of government have also voluntarily ceded some of their authority. This has been most evident in foreign relations. Congress has not formally declared war since 1942, but that has not stopped the president from the use of force. Presidents have relied on the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force passed in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks to justify the use of force in Somalia, Syria, and Yemen. The vast system of alliances has further empowered the president to deploy military forces without consulting Congress (Rapp-Hopper and Waxman 2019). Congress has demonstrated little appetite to claw back those powers (Goldgeier and Saunders 2018). After passing the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act in 1930, Congress decided it could not responsibly execute its constitutional responsibilities on trade. Over the ensuing decades, it delegated many of those powers to the president, marking the beginning of a sustained decline in congressional power.

On questions of oversight, congressional power has eroded badly. The number of hearings on questions of foreign policy has declined precipitously (Fowler 2015). Members of Congress simply lack the electoral incentive to devote time and energy into national security and foreign policy concerns (Milner and Tingley 2015). After Newt Gingrich’s Contract with America, Congress handicapped itself further by reducing its own staff and resources. This has weakened its ability to rely on expertise independent of the executive branch. Again and again, Congress has eschewed responsibility and delegated authority to the president. Political polarization has

further debilitated Congress, encouraging the expansion of presidential powers in response (Mann and Ornstein 2012; Schultz 2018).

The lack of congressional participation and oversight complicates the ability of foreign policy elites to influence grand strategies in multiple ways. The most obvious effect is to weaken one pathway of causal influence. When Congress holds hearings on foreign policy questions, they rely on expert witnesses from beyond the government. Committee hearings afford foreign policy experts an opportunity to weigh in publicly on an administration's foreign policy initiatives. Furthermore, if the executive branch anticipates such hearings, they have an incentive to "work the refs" and consult with experts in order to persuade them of the wisdom of their policy choices. If, however, Congress holds fewer hearings and casts fewer foreign policy votes, then the demand for expert commentary declines. Similarly, executive branch policymakers feel less of a need to preemptively seek out expert opinion.

The more significant effect is that successive presidents will be able to reverse significant portions of their predecessors' foreign policy initiatives. The absence of congressional buy-in means that presidents will execute more and more foreign policies through executive action alone. By definition, presidents can countermand or abrogate preexisting executive agreements. Polarization has eroded the notion that politicians need to govern from the center (Utych 2020). Presidents who alternate from the extremes of the American political spectrum will have an incentive to reverse their predecessors' policies. Grand strategy could represent a generalization of the "Mexico City" policy, in which Republican and Democratic presidents flip-flop rules governing global family planning depending on who controls the executive branch (Cincotta and Crane 2001). The combination of worn-down guardrails and presidents emerging from the ends of the political spectrum will whipsaw U.S. foreign policy between ultra-conservative and ultra-liberal approaches. In such a political climate, the marketplace of ideas ceases to matter and sustainable grand strategy becomes impossible.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that the three trends have debilitated the public sphere's ability to stress-test possible grand strategies. The erosion of trust in authority and expertise has weakened the ability of the foreign policy community to regulate the marketplace of ideas. The increase of political polarization has impaired the ability of experts to influence partisan elites and mass publics about matters of foreign policy. The growth of executive authority has removed an additional channel through which experts can influence grand strategies. Parliamentary systems of government might be partially immune from the last trend. The data, however, strongly suggests that pessimism and polarization affect democracies across the globe (Drezner 2017). These problems are hardly unique to the United States.

Can these trends reverse themselves? That possibility cannot be ruled out. There are nascent signs that legislatures are trying to recover some of their influence over foreign policy decisions. Progressive and conservative foreign policy experts are attempting to debate their worldviews, with the possibility of forging a consensus around foreign policy means and ends (Hurlburt 2019; Goldgeier 2019). Public opinion polling during the Trump era shows a surprisingly strong

rejection of the foreign policy of populist nationalism (Smeltz et al 2018). It is possible that the foreign policy missteps of the Trump administration trigger a renewed appreciation for foreign policy expertise. Mounting external threats could help forge an ideational consensus within the advanced industrialized democracies akin to containment.

There are also reasons for skepticism, however. The GOP base is far more enthusiastic about Trump's "America First" grand strategy, making it difficult for Republicans to pivot away from it. Because the parties are so closely matched in Congress, persistent foreign policy polarization in the legislative branch is likely (Jeong and Quirk 2019). Public opinion is unlikely to be a serious constraint on policymakers, because the public remains largely uninterested and unengaged on debates about grand strategy and international relations. As Halpin et al (2019) found during their focus group research, "When asked what the phrase 'maintaining the liberal international order' indicated to them, all but one of the participants in our focus group drew a blank." Not even external threats will necessarily forge a consensus among the mass public (Myrick 2019). Without influential experts, engaged publics, and functional legislatures, grand strategy will remain the preserve of the executive. Outside expertise will matter less and less.

This is an extremely problematic political environment for the crafting of a viable grand strategy, particularly for the United States in an era of great power competition. The difference between the post-Cold War era and current moment is that in the prior era, the United States could overwhelm threats with superior power. Great power competition, however, requires a long-term strategy more akin to containment, restraint, or primacy. Brands (2019, p. 31) notes, "The United States seems off-balance vis-à-vis its rivals because it has lost its familiarity with the art of long-term competition.... [it] represents the graduate level of strategy." Because of the shifts discussed in this chapter, however, each president's grand strategy will only endure from four to eight years, and then be replaced by one from the opposite side of the political spectrum. In this environment, the contributions of foreign policy elites will be ephemeral. The very concept of a consistent, durable grand strategy will not be sustainable. The marketplace of foreign policy ideas will cease to matter.

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