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Against ‘the Blob’

America’s Foreign Policy in Eurasia’s Heartland is Becoming its Own Greatest Enemy

Michael A. Reynolds

As this article goes to press, America and the world are in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic’s end remains invisible, yet it has already wreaked extraordinary economic disruption around the globe. Inevitably, political upheaval will follow. Indeed, the strain of the pandemic has now catalyzed social and political unrest throughout the United States on a level not seen in half a century.

America’s weight in global affairs is such that no country on earth can be wholly indifferent to its fate. Decisions taken inside the United States are consequential to millions outside the United States, including Eurasia. Attaining a better understanding of the nature of the debates and intellectual currents that

inform those decisions is essential for Americans and non-Americans alike, not least for decisionmakers in the Silk Road region of greater Eurasia.

The sources and causes of the unrest roiling America are manifold and predate the pandemic by years, even decades, and they have drawn Americans into a bitter feud over the very nature and value of their republic. The American *zeitgeist* today differs radically from that of the 1990s when American elites were basking in their victory in the Cold War, their unrivaled military and economic might, and, not least, the promise of globalization to transform the world in America’s image and enrich themselves in the process. They speculated without irony that history had ended and

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culminated in liberal democracy, reveled in American unipolar dominance of the world order, and boasted—in the 1998 words of U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright—that “we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future.”

Less than a year ago almost all America’s elites still took for granted that their society presented a model for the globe to emulate. They regarded America’s 1776 Declaration of Independence as a signal moment in world history—a milestone in a grand story of the liberation of mankind from tyranny. Today, however, they increasingly describe their country as one founded on slavery and genocide and ask whether it can even be redeemed. For example, the country’s largest newspaper, *The New York Times*, has embraced an initiative known as the “1619 Project” that portrays America as a country founded on slavery, not freedom. To be sure, much of this self-loathing is performative. Serious historians have noted the project’s myriad scholarly shortcomings. It reflects a solipsism that only a superpower society could cultivate and indulge. Nonetheless, the ongoing feud over America’s founding betrays genuine doubt about the exceptional nature

of the United States. What is more, it grows out of cleavages that have been in formation for some time and will not disappear overnight. This shift in elite mindset ineluctably will effect a shift in American foreign policy.

Just as premonitions of tumult in American domestic politics have been visible for some time, forewarnings of a reckoning in American foreign policy have been surfacing with increasing frequency since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. From different parts of the political spectrum, more and more independent observers began concluding that something fundamental has gone wrong in American foreign policy. To state just one obvious point, despite spending trillions of dollars on wars and interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere, Washington in the Middle East not only failed to achieve its objectives but often generated results precisely the opposite of what it sought. Successes elsewhere in American foreign policy have been rare.

Yet unlike the case with American domestic politics, where a remarkable constellation of elite interests, institutions, and corporations coalesced in support of those protesting (including the Democrat Party, American universities, *The New York Times* and

The Washington Post, J.P. Morgan, Apple, Amazon, and Major League Baseball, among others), in foreign policy the American establishment has remained stolidly united in favor of the status quo over the past decade and a half.

But as of late—perhaps for the first time since the Vietnam War—America’s foreign policy and national security establishments have become targets of sustained criticism from journalists, veterans, academics, and politicians from all sides of the political spectrum. In a sign of the times, an off-hand remark made in 2016 by Ben Rhodes, at the time a senior aide to U.S. President Barack Obama, that disparaged Washington’s foreign policy establishment as an expansive, relentless, and brainless “Blob” has stuck. Not the least of these critics has been America’s president, Donald Trump, who owes his wholly improbable election in 2016 in part to his disparagement of Washington’s foreign policy orthodoxy and who in his current re-election bid is reminding voters of his contrarian stance. This past year, a think-tank with funding from disparate ideological sources was founded in Washington under

the name Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft for the explicit goal of overturning the “intellectual lethargy and dysfunction” in American foreign policy.

An indicator that this domestic criticism has begun to rattle America’s foreign policy establishment came this spring when *Foreign Affairs*, the flagship journal of that establishment, struck back with a self-congratulatory apologia. The title of the article, “In Defense of the Blob: America’s Foreign Policy Establishment Is the Solution, Not the Problem,” made clear that *Foreign Affairs* imbibes what it has been prescribing for America’s foreign policy: when in trouble, simply double down with more of the same.

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The authors of the article—Hal Brands, Peter Feaver, and Will Inboden (hereafter BFI)—are full time scholars and part-time practitioners with stints in government. As such, they should be as qualified as any to mount a persuasive defense. Their message is blunt. There are no grounds for any reckoning: the “establishment’s practical track record has been impressive,” they assert. “The Blob is not the problem. It is the solution.”

Assessing a foreign policy track record is not simple. One factor complicating assessment is the difficulty of assessing the counterfactual, the road not taken. As BFI caution, “Critics count the problems that have occurred but ignore the problems that have been avoided.” Another factor is the strategic essence of foreign policy; i.e. it is never unilateral, but always a product of interaction between two or more actors. A third is its contextual nature. A great power possessing abundant resources, for example, can mask chronic foreign policy failure in a way that small, vulnerable states with limited means cannot.

But to recognize that the assessment of foreign policy requires discernment is not to say it is impossible. Contra BFI, even a cursory examination of three key theaters—the Middle East, Russia (and its southern geographic periphery), and China, each of which is proximate to the Silk Road region—reveals that the track record of American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has been impressive primarily in its litany of fumbling and failure.

Whereas between 1945 and 1991 America’s foreign policy yielded a global victory over a formidable multidimensional enemy while managing to preserve the

prosperity of Americans at home, since 1991 Washington’s foreign policy has consumed exorbitant resources while delivering results opposite of what it intended and coinciding with the dangerous hollowing out of America’s industrial base and declining prosperity and quality of life, especially for the middle class.

The Blob Strikes Back

The United States “has a healthy marketplace of foreign policy ideas,” BFI assure us. “Discussion over American foreign policy,” they contend, “is loud contentious, diverse, and generally pragmatic.” Those of us old enough to remember the 2016 Republican Primary, however, may not be persuaded. Then-candidate Donald Trump stunned the Republican Party establishment and his rivals when at a debate in South Carolina he had the temerity to say that the invasion of Iraq “was a big, fat mistake” in presidential history.

Trump’s comment was neither new nor outlandish. Eleven years earlier, former U.S. Army general and director of the National Security Agency William Odom predicted that “the invasion of Iraq may well turn out to be the greatest strategic disaster in American history.” Subsequent history bore out Odom’s prognostication. Yet

Trump's assessment of the most momentous foreign policy decision of the past three decades caught his fellow candidates, virtually all of whom were advised by foreign policy professionals from Washington, DC, dumbstruck. Perhaps noise from raucous foreign policy debates in Washington was still ringing in their advisors' heads.

This is not a partisan phenomenon. Obama as a candidate in 2008 pointed to his opposition to the Iraq war. In office, however, he acquiesced to the relentless pressure to intervene abroad, spurring Rhodes to coin the term "the Blob" and leading others, like the Fletcher School's Michael J. Glennon in his book *National Security and Double Government* (2016), to conclude that a national security state bureaucracy controls policy and is responsible for the uncanny continuity in foreign policy from Bush to Obama. Discussion of foreign policy in the Democrat Party's 2020 Presidential primaries was scant, and not coincidentally. The Democrat and media establishments smeared the one candidate who did question the wisdom of American military intervention, U.S. Army National Guard major and Iraq war veteran Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, as sympathetic to war criminals, insinuating that she is a tool of Russian.

In today's America, the use of insinuation to corral discussion of foreign policy is quotidian. The expansion of the country's military presence and security commitments around the world is an axiom of the Blob. As BFI write, the mere fact that post-Cold War presidents "maintained and even expanded the country's global network of alliances and military bases" is itself an achievement. It is as if expansion were the goal, not a means.

Those who question expansion for its own sake, let alone those who advocate retrenchment, the Blob reflexively labels "isolationists." The label "isolationist" implies the critic is, at best, a foreign policy simpleton: the kind who in the 1930s would have thought that the United States could have safely kept out of a war with Hitler. At worst, it suggests the critic might even be sympathetic to Hitler.

Similarly, BFI write that their opponents imagine "the Blob" as a *cabal*, a term derived from the Hebrew word for esoteric mysticism and one that denotes a small, secretive group. This is an odd diversion, given that the more influential critics of Washington's foreign policy consensus argue the opposite, namely that a broad bipartisan conglomeration of interlocking bureaucracies, think-tanks, and lobbies constitutes the Blob.

The reason why the term "the Blob" caught on is because it captures this sprawling essence. The term "cabal" thus is a gross misrepresentation, but it is an effective term for discrediting one's opponents as wild-eyed, tin-foil hat wearing "conspiracy theorists," or to hint that they may be dabbling in the worst kind of conspiracy thinking, the antisemitic kind.

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Impugning the moral character of one's intellectual opponents can be an effective tactic to control political debates, but reliance on it corrodes clear thinking. Indeed, the "In Defense of the Blob" article betrays some of this corrosion. BFI's argument that Washington, DC, hosts a wide-ranging foreign policy debate parallels in uncanny ways the arguments of those who contend that American universities are citadels of free and open discussion of ideas.

To counter arguments and evidence that American universities have shifted markedly to the left in recent decades and therefore host a steadily narrowing range of viewpoints on campus, university presidents, deans, and faculty have generally responded in three ways. First, engage in denial, often by pointing to the vast array of scholarly journals,

books, workshops, and conferences as evidence that intellectual debate on American campuses is open and vigorous. Second, argue that the political imbalance is a feature, not a bug, as it reflects simply the intellectual and moral superiority of some ideas over others. Third, remind listeners that American universities are the envy of the world, whatever their flaws.

BFI attempt all three. The Blob's expert community, they tell us, is "large and heterogeneous," makes available "vast amounts of technocratic knowledge and institutional memory," and supports an impossible range of opinions. "Pick any policy issue, and you can put together a lively debate with ease," BFI assure us. "Other countries," they chasten their doubting reader, "simply do not have comparably large, diverse, permeable, expert communities that encourage vigorous debate over national policy." Indeed, those "other countries would love to have such a Blob of their own."

Signature Pathologies

Significantly, BFI concede that the Blob has presided over "disappointments and even disasters." For instance, they write, "far

too many military interventions—from Somalia to Afghanistan, Iraq to Libya—have been misconceived and mishandled,” they acknowledge. Their phrase “from Somalia to Afghanistan, Iraq to Libya” would suggest that they recognize that error has been the rule, not the exception. Yet they decline to own this and investigate the Blob’s blundering, and opt instead for a classic dodge: the so-called “past exonerative”—the passive admission that mistakes were made.

On the flip side, BFI credit American post-Cold War policy for the fact that “billions of people” in East Asia “benefited from decades of sustained economic growth,” as if the extraordinary growth of the Chinese economy was not the primary driver of this epic transformation. America did play a role. But, alas, it was not simply through the provision of security that American taxpayers subsidized East Asia’s economic growth from 1979, but also through the transfer to China of much of their industrial base, technology, and scientific know-how from the 1990s onward.

The reluctance to confront failure is common. And in their effort to burnish the Blob’s reputation, BFI employ the common

tactic of tarnishing that of their predecessors. In doing so, they betray a signature pathology of the Blob: the inability to conceive of limits to America’s power or responsibility. Thus, they charge the Cold War class with “losing” China, failing to preserve a nuclear monopoly, not stopping the Berlin Wall, and

A signature pathology of the Blob: the inability to conceive of limits to America’s power or responsibility.

not preventing the Tiananmen Square massacre. The reality is these events were amenable to American influence only partially or not at all.

A dangerous lack of self-awareness is another closely related defect of the Blob. Absent from the *Foreign Affairs* article is any appreciation of the fact that America (like any other country) has limited resources. Without a sense of limits, policymakers have little incentive to think about how to prioritize. Prioritization, however, is absolutely essential to long-term success. It is what separates plans from wish lists.

What has allowed American policymakers to avoid the questions of limits and priorities is the belief that America is on a quasi-divine grant or mission to remake the world, and that whatever resources it expends toward that end are multiplied as in a virtuous circle.

America’s expansion of democracy and free markets, the belief is, rests on a synergistic dynamic wherein rising prosperity feeds a desire for more freedom and hence democracy, which in turn creates more friends and allies of America and more trade and prosperity.

The notion that America is obligated and empowered to mold the nations of the world in its image is an assertion, not a statement of empirical fact. Yet, BFI insist, “the American foreign policy establishment is generally more pragmatic than ideological.” Anyone who doubts that ideology profoundly shaped the foreign policies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama need only read their administrations’ words and look at their deeds. In 2002, Condoleezza Rice explained that Bush’s national security strategy “calls on America to use our position of unparalleled strength and influence to create a bal-

ance of power that favors freedom.” America will rely on a “paradigm of progress, founded on political and economic liberty [...] to bring every nation into an expanding circle of development.” Bush hardened and sharpened his ideology in 2005,

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positioning America in a grand metaphysical struggle with a single, clear, and simple choice: freedom or oppression. “We will,” he promised, “persistently clarify the choice before every ruler and every nation.” Bush imagined a world historical spirit worthy of Hegel: “History has an ebb and flow of justice, but history also has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty.”

Obama was not as Manichean as Bush, but he was still more insistent that history had a right side and a wrong side. The “arc of history that bends toward justice,” was no mere ornament of Obama’s rhetoric, but an ordering principle of his worldview and foreign policy. Speaking of the fight against ISIS,

Obama declared, “I am confident we will succeed in this mission because we are on the right side of history.” When Moscow annexed Crimea, he scolded, “Russia is on the wrong side of history on this.” His Secretary of State, John Kerry, rebuked Russia with precisely the same words. The belief that History will vanquish America’s foes and redeem Washington is faith-based and facile, neither pragmatic nor wise.

Sand Trap

The greater Middle East revealed the depth of the Blob's ideological delusion. Washington undertook the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq with the objectives of vanquishing al-Qaeda in the short-term and catalyzing the “paradigm of progress” that over the long-term would allow democracy to take root and cause radical Islam and other forms of violent extremism to dissipate.

That vision was not simplistic, and it was, by its own logic, not unreasonable. It was, however, wholly unreal. Convinced that humanity's only real choice was between freedom or oppression, and that history moves ineluctably toward the former, the Blob was convinced that so long as America acted boldly and resolutely, its success was foreordained.

To realize its vision, the Blob disposed of staggering resources. As scholars like Stephen Walt and Andrew Krepinevich have pointed out, Washington spent on its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq some four to six trillion dollars, or several times more what China is investing in its massive Belt and Road initiative, or tens of times more than the cost of the Marshall Plan. And yet the Blob achieved the very contrary of what it had intended. Al-Qaeda

remains in the field and, in fact, the jihadist movement has metastasized. According to a 2018 study issued by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the number of jihadis has more than doubled since 2001. The Islamic State superseded al-Qaeda in both organization and the virulence of ideology. Iraq never became an outpost of democratization, but it did become an outpost of Iranian influence and incubator of the Islamic State.

Despite fighting in Afghanistan for over 18 years and spending between one and two trillion dollars on reconstruction, development, and democracy promotion, the United States today is reduced to negotiating the terms of its withdrawal with the Taliban—the opponent it overthrew with great fanfare in 2001. Washington is now estranged from the one Muslim society with a democratic government and tradition, Turkey, in no small measure due to policies it felt compelled to adopt to contain the Islamic State.

The debacle of Afghanistan—it bears remembering—was not a single, discrete error. It was instead an error repeated over and over, as Washington obstinately clung to its strategy year after year. Blinded by its ideology to the failures unfolding before its eyes, the Blob acted out the quotidian definition of insanity: doing the same thing

over and over while expecting a different result.

Bush set a pattern of failure, but Obama followed his trail. Obama's innate skittishness preserved him from committing a blunder as great as the invasion of Iraq. But the faith of Obama and his team that history inevitably breaks toward democracy left them prey to their own conceits, most notably during the Arab Spring when they interpreted the burgeoning protests and unrest rippling through multiple Arab countries as the long-awaited moment when a younger and more liberal generation would rise and pull their societies out from oppressive torpor.

In Egypt, the Obama administration facilitated the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood by withdrawing support from the senescent Hosni Mubarak. But when just two years later the Egyptian armed forces toppled the elected government of Muhammad Morsi, the administration could only watch awkwardly as the cycle of repression came full circle. It declined to call the coup a coup, as American law would then block weapons sales to Egypt. Obama's Washington had shown itself by turns to be irresolute, feckless, and cynical. In Libya, it jubilantly helped topple another repressive regime, but that country became a redoubt of ISIS and site of an ongoing civil war.

Obama's intervention in Syria was cloyer, but no more clear-eyed. As unrest and rebellion against Bashar Assad spread in August 2011, Obama inserted himself. Not unlike a Marxist who interpreted events only as struggles between a progressive proletariat and reactionary capital, Obama—like Bush—saw only democrats and dictators. “The United States,” he announced, “has been inspired by the Syrian people's pursuit of a peaceful transition to democracy.” The “repressive tactics of the past,” Obama warned Assad, would no longer work, and so, in clear signal that he expected Assad to go, he announced, “the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”

The arc of history failed to bend, however, and the repressive tactics of the past became the effective ones of the present. Obama then authorized American military and intelligence bodies to arm and train Syrian rebels in what become one of history's largest “covert” operations. The effort quickly became another large and embarrassing American failure, as it recruited a pathetically small number of fighters and fell apart. Matters took a surreal turn in 2015 when former CIA director and retired general David Petraeus advocated that the United States “peel-off [...] moderates” from Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. Only in America, one might jest, could

al-Qaeda members become partners in the war on terror.

Next door in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria scattered the Iraqi army on which Washington had lavished so much. Adding insult to injury, ISIS seized copious stockpiles of American arms, treating the world to the sight of jihadists driving American-made M1 Abrams tanks into battle. Washington then countered those jihadists by collaborating with a Kurdish group that it knew well to be a subsidiary of the most lethal foe of Turkey. It was a reckless betrayal of a treaty ally. Meanwhile, as Washington flailed around harming friends and aiding foes, Russia stepped in and decisively altered the course of the Syrian Civil War with the deployment of a modest amount of airpower, managing to build closer ties to Turkey, Israel, and others in the process.

Mother Goose Tussling with Russia

This brings us to the Eurasian heartland. Toward Russia, the Blob is schizoid, careening between two incompatible readings of the country. One is contemptuous of Russia as an economically feeble, demographically dying, militarily overstretched kleptocracy that is dependent on the export of hydrocarbons. As the late Senator John

McCain famously put it, “Russia is a gas station masquerading as a country.” Obama dismissed Russia as a “regional power” with an “economy in tatters” and politically “isolated.” Vice President Joe Biden in July 2009 clucked that America need not work too hard on relations with Russia since time is on America’s side. Russia’s troubles are such that it will have no choice but to bow to American pressure. Duke University’s Peter Feaver—the ‘F’ in the subsequently BFI-authored “In Defense of the Blob” article—the following day enthusiastically endorsed Biden’s opinion and in a demonstration of bipartisan simpatico likened Russia to an adolescent and its behaviors to “tantrums.” In so doing, Feaver revealed another curiosity of the bipartisan Blob: its proclivity to imagine America not as the world’s policeman so much as the world’s nanny, there to scold, punish, and praise as appropriate the other, more immature members of the family of nations. This might be called the “Mother Goose” theory of American statecraft.

Yet simultaneously the Blob presents Russia as a grave menace, capable of overrunning NATO territory and manipulating American public opinion and even elections. There is undoubtedly an element of bureaucratic self-interest here. The Cold War birthed and shaped

much of America’s national security establishment, and the contemporary portrayal of a revanchist Russia legitimizes much of the same force structures. This is not to mention the multiple functions that hysteria over Russia has served in American domestic politics since 2016, including deflecting blame for Hillary Clinton’s stunning defeat and undermining Donald Trump by suggesting that he is a Russian tool. Playing up the Russian threat legitimates large swathes of contemporary Washington.

In reality, outside of a nuclear exchange it is almost impossible to contend that Russia today threatens vital American interests. A comparison with the Soviet threat is telling. The Soviet Union was an enormous entity with seemingly inexhaustible human and natural resources, massive military and nuclear forces, and a formidable net-

work of satellites and allies around the world. Not least, it espoused a revolutionary ideology, Marxist-Leninism, that fired imaginations and ambitions of millions around the globe and targeted Western society for destruction. Yet the United States managed to contain and prevail over

the Soviet Union without military bases between the Baltic and Black Seas and while securing prosperity for its citizens at home.

BFI draw an unwarranted equivalence between the Blob and expertise. The problem is not that the vast American establishment do not possess talented and informed people, but that it cannot use such assets better. NATO expansion is a telling—and important—example. Expert opinion was overwhelmingly against it. Not only did George Kennan, one of America’s best Russia experts and perhaps its greatest diplomat, oppose NATO expansion, so did hawkish experts such as Paul Nitze, Richard

Pipes, and Fred Iklé, among many others. NATO expansion, these experts warned, would do nothing to improve American security but would inevitably alienate the Russian people, not just

the leadership. Strobe Talbott, Bill Clinton’s point man on NATO expansion, lamented that everyone in expert circles opposed enlargement. Nonetheless, NATO expanded.

When issuing their admonitions about NATO enlargement, the aforementioned architects of

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America's Cold War strategy probably never anticipated the amateurism of their successors. In May 2008, George W. Bush declared at a conference in Bucharest that Georgia and Ukraine would become members of NATO, overriding the express wishes of America's French and German allies. It was a wildly provocative move. Whereas Georgia and Ukraine could in no way be regarded as "vital" to the United States or of NATO, as neighbors of Russia they are by definition of special concern to Moscow. Georgia borders the most sensitive part of the Russian Federation, Chechnya, where Russia was then fighting an active Islamist insurgency that had made use of Georgian territory for supply. Ukraine, aside from its size and location, is the cradle of Russian culture and identity. One can insist that Russia's strategic and cultural sensitivities should be irrelevant, since Georgia and Ukraine are sovereign nation-states. That might be true from an ideological and legalistic standpoint, but is thoroughly false from a prudential, pragmatic, and political one.

First Georgia...

Washington's recklessness extended into involvement in Georgian and Ukrainian politics. The Bush administration had embraced Georgian president Mikheil

Saakashvili tightly. The young Georgian's enthusiasm for the United States was especially welcome at a time when America's international prestige was at a low as a result of the moldering intervention in Iraq. Bush visited the mountainous country, hailed Georgia as a "beacon of liberty" in the broader region, and the Georgians named a prominent thoroughfare in their capital after him.

Yet for all its celebration of partnership with Georgia, Washington was inattentive to the country, and the outbreak of war caught Washington shamefully flatfooted. When the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency received news of the war, he was uncertain who in his agency was responsible for Georgia and had to scramble to get personnel there. The Bush White House, according to then-National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, ran hot with talk of hitting the Russians hard. At least, that is, until Hadley essentially posed the question: "Are we ready to go to war with Russia over Georgia?" Hadley's query brought the discussion to a halt, since the answer was obvious. But that question should have been asked—and answered—in Bucharest in May.

Another question that America's foreign policy professionals should have asked earlier, is with whom

were they partnering on the periphery of Eurasia? It was Saakashvili who had ignited the war when he ordered Georgian forces to retake the breakaway republic of South Ossetia. Saakashvili, in the words of then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, was "capricious" and a "firebrand." Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was still more direct, describing the Georgian president as an "aggressive and impetuous nationalist."

Russia's rout of Georgia was another fiasco of Blob expansionism. In defeating Saakashvili, Vladimir Putin had demonstrated that he understood better than Washington's professionals the low value that Washington assigned to Georgia. When push had come to shove, Washington balked, supplying some humanitarian aid and flying a Georgian brigade back home from Iraq, where the Georgian soldiers had been deployed to shore up the pretense that Washington was leading a multinational coalition there. Reflecting on the war, CIA director Hayden confessed the United States "came up short." And the CIA, he said, "had not given

Hadley or anyone else any warning of the conflict, even though it was our friends, the Georgians, who had precipitated it."

Bush left office with a Russian policy in tatters. Obama's team, too, combined striking lapses in professionalism with autopilot overextension. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recognized that Bush had bungled with Russia to America's detriment and sought to repair matters. She stumbled out of the gate, however, when, in a bid to signal the Obama administration's desire for a new start in relations, she handed her Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, a gimmicky red button reading in big bold letters "Reset" in English and "Peregruzka" in Russian. As Lavrov stood holding the button, Clinton asked whether the Russian translation was correct, adding,

"We worked hard to get the Russian word right." An uncomfortable Lavrov could answer only, "No." The Americans had not translated the word properly. The word *peregruzka* means "overload." Her staff might have tried a little harder and looked at a dictionary.

Such rank amateurism was an embarrassing start, but it was not the end of embarrassment. Right

Another question that America's foreign policy professionals should have asked earlier, is with whom were they partnering on the periphery of Eurasia?

before taking up his post in 2012, Obama's handpicked envoy to Moscow Michael McFaul described himself to the Russian media as "a specialist on democracy, anti-dictatorial movements, on revolutions" and added that this was the reason behind his appointment as ambassador. It takes a certain *chutzpah* to go to Moscow boasting of expertise in social movements and revolutions. That McFaul was not by profession a diplomat became painfully obvious when he violated the first rule of diplomacy and publicly insulted his host state by calling Russia "a savage country" in front of a Russian television crew. McFaul was understandably frustrated by the crew's relentless tracking of him, but the optics were damning. Not much in McFaul's tenure as ambassador was successful, and he resigned his post in February 2014.

...Then Ukraine...

As in Georgia, the United States has little at stake in Ukraine and the conflict there has done nothing to advance American interests. Once again, key foreign policy officials demonstrated a greater talent for provocation than for professionalism. When in December 2013 demonstrators in favor of an association agreement with the European Union took to Maidan square in Ukraine's capital, Assistant Secretary of State

for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland arrived on the scene to show her support, demonstratively sticking loaves of bread into the hands of often uncomprehending people standing on the Maidan. It was a curious act of street theater, particularly for a diplomat, but Nuland made her point that American officials would play a role in Ukraine. Similarly, McCain and other American politicians flew to Kyiv to speak to anti-government crowds on the Maidan, adding to the pageantry.

In February 2014, tensions on the Maidan exploded in violence. Ukraine's president fled to Moscow, converting Ukraine's simmering internal crisis into an acute international one. Moscow labeled the event an illegal coup. As Washington was instructing Russia not to meddle in Ukraine's internal politics and that "it is up to the Ukrainian people to decide their future," a recording of a conversation where Nuland and the American ambassador to Ukraine discuss who should and should not serve in the new government and how to achieve this outcome surfaced. In the discussion Nuland used a profanity to dismiss the European Union. It was a triple embarrassment. In a stroke it left no doubt about American involvement in Ukrainian affairs, revealed the disdain of prominent American

diplo-mats for America's allies, and demonstrated again an American inability to maintain secure communications. Coming on the heels of the Wikileaks, Edward Snowden, and Chelsea Manning scandals, the lax communication discipline shown by State Department officials was another worrying indicator of slipping professional standards.

For American foreign policy, the fall of the pro-Russian Ukrainian president did initially appear to be a coup, in the sense of a stroke of success. But true to the predictions of the manifold American experts who had cautioned against NATO enlargement, Russia was willing to fight, and responded to America's involvement promptly by seizing the Crimean Peninsula and raising insurrections in eastern Ukraine. Washington was again caught flat-footed, confused, and unsure how to respond, because, rhetoric aside, it had little at stake in Ukraine. Once again, a forward leaning foreign policy that cannot distinguish between vital and other interests had needlessly placed America in an exposed position.

The standoff in and over Ukraine continues. Ukraine remains frac-

tured, corrupt, and economically sputtering. While it is true that Russia has suffered from the ongoing stalemate, the United States has not won anything from a crisis that it did so much to escalate. As the title of a 2017 study of the conflict issued by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) puts it, "Everyone Loses."

That the cases of Ukraine and Georgia represent clear-cut failures of reckless American overextension is not the unduly harsh assessment of an outside academic, but the judgment of one of America's most experienced foreign policy insiders, former Director of the CIA and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who wrote forthrightly that "trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was truly overreaching." Yet BFI assert, "It is hard to see how [...] not expanding NATO would have encouraged less bullying from Moscow." It is still harder to see how picking and then losing fights in Eurasia either benefits America or deters bullying. The electoral crisis brewing in Belarus at the time of writing may well reveal both the fragility of that country's ruling regime and the anemic condition

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of Putin's Russia. The outcome regardless can contribute little to American security, and the asymmetry in the stakes involved promises a perpetual volatility.

...Now China

The rise of China presents a challenge far greater than those of the Middle East or Russia, as China is a continental-sized power that possesses the population, economy, technological base, military capacity, and social cohesion that match or supersede those of the United States. To get China right truly is vital. Thus far the Blob has not. BFI do acknowledge this rather important point, but shy from exploring it.

U.S. President Richard Nixon's opening to China in 1972 is acknowledged as a master stroke in the Cold War. Whereas catechizing schoolmarm can see non-democracies only as a homogenous class of miscreants, Nixon understood geography and context. By reaching out to Mao, incidentally one of history's most odious actors, Nixon outflanked the Soviets in Asia and helped check their global ambitions precisely when the United States was reeling from overextension in Vietnam and a stagnant, inflationary economy at home.

Contrast that with the post-Cold War record on China. Two decades ago, Washington wagered that "globalization," e.g. the admission of China to the WTO and the transfer of America's industrial base there, would, in BFI's words, "mellow" China and help it "fit easily into the U.S.-led order." Today we know this wager was a loser. BFI correctly describe Trump's refusal to accept China's exploitative trade practices as "overdue." But this raises the question of why it required an outsider to get something so fundamental right? The rise of China has been long in the making and open in plain sight. According to the World Bank, in 1991 China's GDP was \$383 billion. In 2018 it was \$13.6 trillion. The coronavirus pandemic revealed some important things about China and its relations with America.

One is America's mortal dependence on China for medical and pharmaceutical products. Another is that China prioritizes the lives of its citizens over those of Americans and will deploy its economic capacity accordingly. A third is that China has not mellowed but grown contemptuous of the United States. Far from composing a picture of resolve and competence, the for-

eign policy failures noted above have compounded the signal that America's mismanagement of its economy has sent to China. One may argue how to apportion blame for this between Trump's missteps and those of his predecessors, but from Beijing's perspective they are all American.

This is not the place for a comprehensive account of why the Blob failed to recognize and adapt to such a momentous change. A willful self-delusion fed by a corporate interest in easy profits from China's cheaper labor and manufacturing costs is one part. Another source of delusion was Washington's conviction that global "free trade" is sacrosanct, good in and of itself and indistinguishable from America's national interest, and its corollary that a trade war with China could only be ruinous. Addled by such dogma and distracted by its pursuit of secondary and tertiary interests in other parts of the globe, the Blob allowed America to slide into a dangerous position vis-à-vis China.

Unsustainable

To return to the theme raised at the opening of this article: America is now undergoing a domestic crisis over its very legitimacy. The corona-

virus touched off, but did not cause, this crisis. Large sectors of America's elites have welcomed and fanned the crisis for a mix of motives. Nonetheless, the crisis is rooted in a genuine clash over America's worth as a civilization, and it portends an inevitable shake up in foreign policy, including in the Silk Road region.

But whereas in this domestic crisis a large portion of America's elites are insistent on change, in the sphere of foreign policy the elites have maintained a robust consensus in favor of the status quo. Since the end of the Cold War, that consensus has equated the American national interest with the expansion of America's military alliances and presence around the world, prioritizing global trade over the maintenance of industry at home, and the liberal use of military, covert, and other forms of intervention to promote the establishment of regimes led by local elites amenable to the American-led international order. This consensus has persisted despite overwhelming evidence that post-Cold War American foreign policy has been ineffective, even self-destructive.

A coalescing of critiques in the past year has finally compelled the foreign policy establishment

to begin defending its record and assumptions. BFI's "In Defense of the Blob" represents one prominent apologetic. Yet far from reassuring the reader about the future of American foreign policy, instead the article displays some of the pathologies of the Blob's worldview and thought processes. BFI's readers are left to conclude that America's foreign policy establishment is stubbornly resis-

tant to understanding how fundamentally it has failed in past two decades in critical theatres such as the greater Middle East and the broader Silk Road region, and how much the world has changed in the meantime. Sapped internally by a domestic crisis of legitimacy and crippled by a foreign policy apparatus that is prideful, blind, and bullheaded, America has become its own greatest enemy. **BD**

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