

VOICE

America's Polarization Is a Foreign Policy Problem, Too

The fact that Democrats and Republicans hate each other is making the United States weaker.



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Vice President Mike Pence listens while Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer argue with President Donald Trump at the White House on Dec. 11, 2018 in Washington. (Brendan Smalowski/AFP/Getty Images)

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This notion was always a bit of an exaggeration—if not an outright myth—even in the heyday of the fabled “Cold War consensus.” The supposed need to suppress partisan differences didn’t prevent nasty accusations about “who lost China?” in the 1940s and early 1950s, along with angry debates over the war in Korea, the broader phenomenon of McCarthyism, the supposed “missile gap” of the late 1950s, or the deep divisions that emerged during the Vietnam War. Nor do I recall a lot of bipartisan restraint in the late 1970s—when Republicans attacked former President Jimmy Carter over everything from Iran to the Panama Canal—or the 1980s, when Democrats accused former President Ronald Reagan’s administration of a cavalier approach toward nuclear war and giving illegal support to right-wing death squads in Central America. Moreover, too much consensus can be as harmful as deep disagreement. If the foreign-policy elite becomes wedded to a bunch of bad ideas and to a flawed grand strategy, the result is likely to be a protracted series of failures. You know: like the past 25 years.

That said, there’s no question that the United States is at a level of political polarization unseen for many decades. Most of the attention to this phenomenon has focused on its effects on America’s internal politics, and some observers are clearly worried that the core institutions of the country might be at risk—understandable, given President Donald Trump’s open hostility towards some of these institutions, his apparent fondness for authoritarians, and the emergence of something resembling “state media” (i.e., Fox News). Less attention has been paid, however, to the impact that hyperpolarization could have on U.S. foreign policy. Apart from an excellent essay by Ken Schultz of Stanford University, this topic just hasn’t received a lot of attention. But it should.

How might excessive polarization—where members of a society increasingly cluster into separate “tribes” sharing political beliefs with each other, but not with members of the opposing group—undermine foreign policy? Granting that a degree of disagreement is both unavoidable and often desirable, how might such divisions get out of hand and begin to damage America’s ability to interact with the outside world sensibly and successfully?

We should begin by recognizing that today’s level of polarization may be partly a reflection of America’s privileged international position. Once the Soviet Union collapsed and left the United States at the pinnacle of power, the need for national unity declined and ambitious politicians had less need to show restraint in attacking their political rivals. As Michael Desch argued in a seminal article, states facing serious national-security challenges tend to be stronger and more unified, whereas those in a benign international environment are prone to grow more fractious. America’s trajectory since 1992 fits Desch’s argument quite well, notwithstanding the brief surge of patriotic feeling that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks. To put it bluntly: Because the United States was now so safe and secure, politicians felt they could sow division at

Unfortunately, one negative impact of excessive polarization is a decreased ability to do the things that can keep the country on top for a long time. If polarization prevents the federal government from taking effective action on climate change, decaying infrastructure, the opioid epidemic, primary education, financial regulation, the deficit, or any number of other problems, America's long-term position of power could erode and leave the country less able to handle future foreign-policy challenges.

Moreover, as Schultz notes, polarization leaves the country more vulnerable to outside interference, as Russia's efforts to interfere in the 2016 election illustrate. We still don't know exactly what Moscow did and what effects it ultimately had, but it is clear that at a minimum, Russia sought to exploit and exacerbate internal divisions that already existed. And this sort of thing can rapidly become self-reinforcing, as opposing sides leap to accuse each other not just of bad judgment but of being actively disloyal. This sort of thing is not unprecedented in U.S. political history: In the early days of the republic, Hamiltonians accused Thomas Jefferson of being overly sympathetic to revolutionary France, while Jeffersonians believed Hamilton to be a closet monarchist with a poorly disguised sympathy for Great Britain. It did not take much for either group to see the other as more than misguided.

Schultz also points out that polarization threatens a nation's ability to reach agreements with other countries. It is no accident that presidents have come to rely more and more on executive agreements rather than formal, ratified treaties: It has become increasingly difficult to get the latter through a divided Congress. Of equal concern is the possibility that other states will be wary of making mutually beneficial agreements with the United States, simply because they have no way to be sure whether an agreement reached this year will survive the next election. People who think U.S. interests are best served by avoiding international agreements and maximizing the country's freedom of action (e.g., John Bolton) might welcome such a situation, but this view is dangerously shortsighted. The United States has benefited greatly from a host of past agreements of various types, and it makes no sense to encourage other states to have less and less confidence in the value of U.S. pledges. Nobody expects the United States to act contrary to its interests, but how can it expect other countries to do something it wants in exchange for something they want, if they have no way of knowing whether it will deliver?

Indeed, the problem of inconstancy may be even worse than Schultz suggests. Once foreign policy begins to oscillate between two increasingly divided factions, each of the groups has an incentive to pursue its most ambitious, controversial, or extreme projects whenever it happens to be in a position of power. Not only does

the American system of government is to outside observers. When that happens, the country's moral voice—already compromised by foreign-policy excesses—gets reduced to a whisper. I mean, seriously: What sensible foreign country would listen to an American telling it how to organize a government, write a constitution, root out political corruption, or hold officials accountable, when the U.S. system itself seems increasingly broken and the political ecosystem is populated by unprincipled popinjays, corrupt con men, habitual liars, and senior officials whose chief skill is failing upward? When a nation's politics are sufficiently polarized, the worst people can still find safe sinecures within their tribe. Yeats got it exactly right: “The best lack all conviction, / While the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

Polarization also threatens to defeat the growing effort by Congress to wrest back some of the powers over foreign policy enshrined in the Constitution (such as the capacity to declare war), powers that presidents have gradually usurped over many decades. On balance, U.S. foreign policy would be better served if Congress provided a forum for genuine debate—in part to better inform the public—and if it performed effective oversight over many aspects of the country's foreign policy. But a Congress divided into warring factions, that uses its powers not to debate, oversee, and refine U.S. policy, but rather to grandstand, distract, and advance a purely partisan agenda, is hardly an institution that is likely to have a positive impact on U.S. foreign policy.

Lastly, as I noted in my recent book, deep polarization also makes it harder for the country to learn the right lessons from the past. Learning from past mistakes is essential but also difficult, because any historical episode yields many lessons and reasonable people can disagree about which lessons to draw. But when politics becomes tribal and there is little overlap between rival camps, each will simply believe its own self-serving narrative and will draw very different lessons from the past. One sees this already in the case of the Iraq War, which about as clear an example of a foreign-policy debacle as one could name. But where Democrats blame the administration of former President George W. Bush for leading the country to war under false pretenses and then bungling the occupation, Republicans now insist the United States was on the path to victory after the 2007 “surge” and blame former President Barack Obama for pulling the country out too early. Once politics becomes sufficiently polarized, we won't agree on lessons or even on basic facts.

What's to be done about this situation? If I had a quick and easy solution to this problem, I wouldn't need to work for a living. One “solution” would be the emergence of a “clear and present danger” that would impart some discipline and restraint to American foreign policy, but that's an awfully big price to pay for greater harmony at home. Would the United States really be better off facing a more dangerous world, even if it did encourage politicians and pundits to be more careful and judicious in their public discourse? And there's no guarantee that a more dangerous world would instantly cause the political class to return to earlier levels of

There are other remedies that have been proposed—electoral reforms that would encourage centrist candidates, more systematic efforts to “ghost” known trolls, and government and private sector initiatives to halt foreign efforts to exacerbate the existing divisions. And we can hope that the current period of hyperpartisanship is merely a phase, and that the fever will eventually break and restore the United States to a more healthy political condition.

I don't know if any of these remedies would work, or if any of these reasons for optimism are valid. But I do know this: Polarization doesn't just make it harder to address America's domestic challenges; it's a deep drag on the country's ability to advance its interests overseas. Good thing the United States is already pretty darn safe and secure. If we had to be competent, farsighted, disciplined, and smart these days, we'd be in real trouble.

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