The Arab Spring and the Illusion of a Pragmatic Approach to Foreign Policy

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As Arab Spring moves into Arab Fall, a review of current policy approaches reveals little coherence towards any grand design. Last week, Russia vetoed the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) imposing sanctions on the Syrian regime despite brutal oppression by Bashar al-Assad and his security forces where approximately 4000 peaceful protestors have lost their lives. At the same time, forces of the National Transitional Council of Libya, which received full backing by UNSCR and NATO, are taking the last stronghold of former Libyan dictator, Muammar Gaddafi. Meanwhile, Yemenis continue to be killed as Ali Abdullah Saleh refuses to step down, anti-Americanism in post-revolutionary Egypt is on the rise due to the long time U.S. support for former President Hosni Mubarak, the Palestinians have taken their desire for statehood to the U.N. in opposition to requests by the United States, and Saudi Arabia continues in the status quo with little pressure to reform from the international community. From Bahrain to Tunisia and Libya to Iran, we see varying foreign policy reactions to popular movements demanding liberty and reform. This may seem appropriate, after all, great powers have varying degrees of interests at stake in each of these situations -- a pragmatic, interest-based approach encourages states to take each situation on a case-by-case basis; employing instruments of power based on a calculus of interests, costs and risks, like an investor examining a new venture. However, these pragmatic approaches in the face of crisis are unlikely to serve a state's interests in the long term, and are the equivalent of risky day trading, versus a longer, slow and steady approach of investing, such as dollar-cost-averaging with regular investments over long-periods of time.

Pragmatic approaches of the past have led to the challenges we face today. It should be no surprise that after 30 years of consistent support to a brutal dictator, successful revolutionary forces are less inclined to heed the suggestions of that dictator's patron. The interests of the United States are best served by a consistent policy supporting basic freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, protections against the police powers of a state -- unreasonable search and seizure, unlawful interrogation techniques, and imprisonment without due process of law. Further, expanding free market principles that have proven to improve lives and lift nations out of poverty such free trade, property rights, and free currency exchange, is also in the interest the United States. Advocacy by the United States should include programs to encourage the growth of civil society, popular participation in governance, reform efforts to ensure those that govern are subject to rule of law and not private whim, and that corrupt officials are prosecuted. While such efforts have been undertaken by the United States Agency for International Development for decades, they hardly amount to cornerstones of U.S. foreign policy. That the
strongest relationships between the U.S. and Egypt have been military-military rather than between the State Department and their Foreign Ministry, or between the Treasury Department and their Central Bank, is an indictment on foreign policy direction and appropriation over many years. The U.S. cannot afford to become embroiled in conflicts that do not threaten vital national interests, but it can hardly afford to turn its back on masses of humanity that are seeking freedom and justice throughout the world. The brave actions of Ambassador Ford in Syria as he meets with dissidents in the face of Assad's hired goons should be replicated in Saudi Arabia, China, and wherever oppression reigns. In our globalized world our economic ties are such that pressing for reform will not significantly undercut U.S. interests in these states, but when consistently applied, will demonstrate a commitment to freedom that is unquestioned and will win us friends long after the tyrants are gone. Our greatest state to state export should not be weapons, but rather technical expertise to help those that desire it obtain assistance in reforming laws and markets, establish good governance, ensure rule of law, and protect populations from human rights abuses by their security forces. This will require an increase in appropriations to foreign assistance programs, but this investment will pay large dividends in the future. If needs be in our resource constrained environment, this new investments could come from reallocating resources from the Department of Defense, where officials well know that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

If we continue to pursue "pragmatic" approaches in the moment, rather than truly pragmatic approaches that are loyal to our core values, we will find ourselves committed to handling crisis after crisis with far greater cost in blood and treasure. We must rise above the costly tactical and operational levels of war and peace-building and engage at the strategic level. On both a national level and a multi-national level the U.S. must lead out in efforts to secure the ideals established at Nuremberg, reaffirmed again in UNSCR 1674 (2006), that civilian populations must be protected from Crimes Against Humanity. The U.S. should encourage United Nations Security Council reform to ensure that political expediency does not trump the international community's obligations to secure the peace. The U.S. should also ratify the Rome Statute and become members of the International Criminal Court.

The initial opportunity the Arab Spring presented has long passed -- that opportunity was in the decades before the uprisings. While we need to do all we can to help these people now, our focus needs to shift from crisis mode, to long-term coherence in our policy. By increased focus on capacity building and reform, strong advocacy of freedom and commitment to international law, the U.S. will move away from pragmatism of the day, and invest in the peace of the future, yielding dividends for generations to come. Then, and only then, we will be ready for the next Arab, or African, or Asian Spring.