THE VITAL NEED FOR A NEW FOREIGN POLICY CONSENSUS

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With public debt over 15 trillion dollars and slow economic recovery, the electorate rightly continues to focus on domestic affairs. Yet, with the exception of the Iranian issue, Americans and their Presidential candidates have spent little energy substantially debating the direction of US foreign policy at all. This is unfortunate. Now, possibly more than ever before in our history, we are in need of strong leadership both at home and abroad. Policy choices in recent years and an unyielding financial crisis have driven the US to what could be seen in future years as a turning point in history. Without smart choices and course corrections in the near term, the much debated decline of America could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The United States in 2012 finds itself in a similar position to the United Kingdom post-World War II or the Soviet Union in 1988—nearly bankrupt and in danger of losing legitimacy at home and abroad. Regional powers that have been free riders of America’s effort to secure the commons such as India, China and Turkey are poised to step forward to attain their own vision and interests, which more often than not, will not be consistent with American interests or values. The local and the global are so interconnected that we cannot afford a myopic focus on domestic policy; nor can we pursue international policy in a vacuum as if it were unconnected to our well being at home. Rather, the US must chart a course towards resurgence that is true to our core values. Only in this way can we ensure prosperity and security at home and abroad.

American creativity and productivity are without compare. Turn-around experts, we root for the underdog, and know in our hearts that in our system it is possible to make it to the top even when scratching our way up from the bottom. There is still time for the US to recover from its lapses and prevent the pending atrophy of American prosperity and influence. The recent turnaround of Ford Motor Company may serve as an example to us here—we need to abandon policies that erode our health like a cancer, cut fat, increase productivity and rebrand ourselves while staying true to our core values.

AN END TO MALIGNANT POLICY APPROACHES

In years past, advisors to the President, veterans of Vietnam, recognized that high-minded discussions of boots-on-the ground/peace keeping and nation-building were well intentioned, but ill-advised sure fire ways to sap American power and bleed-out resources. Yet in recent years we have had a shift toward counterinsurgency (COIN) strategies, first piece-meal and latter by fiat, in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The costs of these COIN efforts are staggering, possibly as high a $4 trillion USD, with 6000 US military killed, 25,000 allied forces, and 236,000 civilians, plus another 550,000 US veterans disabled. COIN doctrine, while founded on historical case-studies, is significantly flawed as applied by US forces. COIN is incredibly expensive, no matter who undertakes it. The time and expense in blood and treasure is cost prohibitive for any nation that does not face an existential threat to its survival—a nation without its most vital interests at stake will likely be worn down before they have secured the peace. It is particularly ill-
suited to a democracy as it relates to foreign wars. Further, as history has shown in places like Turkey and Vietnam, COIN will not succeed where safe havens cannot be eliminated and lines of communication and re-supply effectively controlled. Our COIN approaches in both Iraq and Afghanistan have been problematic for these reasons. In addition to the extraordinary costs of COIN, long term occupation of foreign territories by US forces may result in loss of political influence and goodwill. Friends can be alienated by these policies as negative perceptions of America on the street drive political realities at home. This in turn leads to decreased power to lead and obtain cooperation on other pressing issues. Long term occupation also increases the odds of damage done by the “strategic corporal”—as seen in the impact on US power and reputation by the criminal acts of those at Abu Ghraib, or judgment errors of Koran burners at Bagram. The bottom line here is that where vital, existential US interests are not at stake, we should avoid employing boots on the ground for any lengthy period of time.

An additional modern policy choice that has reaped negative results is that of cold-hearted pragmatism in sidling up to friendly dictators without regard for their repressive actions at home. While it is not the responsibility of the US to overthrow repressive regimes, we should apply pressure where possible and should actively speak out about abuses and the need for reform. Past policy choices in favor of old-world power politics and short-term pragmatism are catching up with us in the post-Arab Spring world. Though occasional public statements had been made about the need for liberalization in some of these states, these comments were too few and backed by little obvious pressure. As freedom spreads and tyrants fall, the US’s historical support for reformers, or lack thereof, will be remembered by the new regimes that emerge. Support for autocratic regimes may bring short term benefits but will yield negative consequences in the long term, and is ultimately inconsistent with US values.

A further trend that has virtually ensured poor policy choices is the abdication by Congress of its constitutional responsibility in war making powers. With the sole authority to declare war, the mandate to maintain the military, and the vitally important taxing and spending powers, Congress should take a robust role in decisions regarding conflicts and appropriation priorities as related to national defense and not parochial interests. The constitution was established to provide for the common defense, but also to ensure a weak central government, one in which decisions to put Americans in harm’s way would require debate and consensus. In the modern era, Congress has more often than not provided “blank checks” to the President and DoD. Greater debate and conscientious handling of the purse strings by Congress could prevent ill advised adventures abroad.

EFFICIENCIES: REVOLUTION OF MILITARY AFFAIRS

Though there are significant challenges to American primacy, we have many competitive advantages upon which to build. As COIN is quickly being dismissed as the doctrine de jour, the Air-Sea Battle has come to fore as the leading concept in defense lexicon. The American military industrial complex stands ready to generate the newest weapons platforms and modifications to ensure continued security of the commons as conventional threats emerge. That we are focused on these threats before they have emerged fully suggests that we will be prepared to meet them, and may be able to successfully deter hostile action through our preparedness if sufficient funding is provided.

In the short term however, the most likely threats continue to be those of an asymmetric nature: rogue states, terrorists, organized criminal syndicates, hostile intelligence networks working to steal our technology, cyber threats, etc. Over the last decade we have developed significant capabilities in synergies driven by communications technology and team approaches. Persistent intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance capabilities provided by US unmanned aerial systems (UAS) have been integrated with new and existing technical and human intelligence platforms to enable the US to engage the enemy across the spectrum of law enforcement, intelligence, and special operations responses with
great speed and accuracy, changing the dynamics of modern warfare in unparalleled ways. Further investments to expand these technical and human capabilities will ensure that America is prepared to identify, exploit and neutralize hostile threats. From peacekeeping to border security, from counterterrorism to conventional strike, the synchronization of UAS and intelligence technologies with high end operators will exponentially reduce the cost and footprint of American power projection and employment.

REBRANDING AMERICAN LEADERSHIP IN THE WORLD

American foreign policy needs to be repositioned to stand upon the bedrock foundation of our nation’s values. First and foremost, this mean continued efforts to secure the US homeland and ensure freedom of the seas. With looming threats from terrorists, transnational cartels, cyber attacks and espionage, securing the homeland is more complex than ever. Adjusting to these asymmetric threats will require a reshaping of defensive capabilities, necessitating fewer foreign commitments and both additional law enforcement resources and greater law enforcement efficiencies. Strategic nuclear, space and cyber capabilities and conventional defensive capabilities in the homeland must be maintained to deter threats and ensure the peace. Additionally, US capabilities for the Air-Sea battle must be developed to ensure continued access to the high seas and deter regional actors from asserting control over international waterways. A military focus on defensive operations is consistent with the most historical roots of the American tradition and reestablishes a moral policy foundation in the place of the amoral, pragmatic policy approaches of realpolitik that have deteriorated US soft-power over many decades.

Some will argue that the best defense is a good offense, and that by fighting our enemies abroad, we ensure we do not have to face them at home. Clearly there is some need to engage adversaries abroad, but only in instances where US vital interests are at risk. Further, the strategic approach chosen should be consistent with the nature of the threat. Threats from terrorists overseas are best handled not by conventional forces engaged in COIN, but by joint and multilateral intelligence, law enforcement, and special operations forces. Individual regime strongmen threatening the US can be dealt with through precision deployment of diplomatic, informational, military and economic actions rather than the mass deployment of ground forces, whose second and third order effects often result in greater harms than those resolved.

Conventional ground forces must be maintained, but their use should be limited to responses to direct threats to the US, in accordance with the standards of self-defense under international law. When conventional ground forces are utilized, their use must be overwhelming, and debilitating, with post-conflict reconstruction capabilities to match. Such conflicts may require hundreds of thousands of deployed forces and would be necessarily rare. This standard would require the Commander in Chief to maintain a level of moral certitude that would resonate with the American people, since deployment of ground forces could necessitate a draft. As discussed above, conventional forces should not engage in COIN, peace-keeping or national-building, absent a true existential threat to the United States. Limiting the use of conventional forces in this manner will preserve strength and secure peace.

Further, American foreign policy should return to its roots in seeking to open markets and expand trade. Regulatory regimes should be reviewed to ensure the proper balance between security and the need to increase exports of American goods. The US needs continued engagement through multi-lateral diplomacy to expand and enforce free trade, fair labor, and environmentally sound standards of production to ensure US companies can compete in a fair and humane manner.

A foreign policy built upon principles of self defense and free markets will re-enthrone diplomatic and economic instruments of power as the predominant defining characteristics of our republic. The
militarization of foreign policy has led to inordinate loss of life, displacement of innocents, and significant debt burdens. A refocus on diplomacy, with an emphasis on increasing economic relationships, will bolster stability, economic prosperity, and the expansion of liberty. The US must again be viewed as a benevolent power—seeking not its own aggrandizement, but only its own security and prosperity for all.

What about our moral responsibility to intervene in crises abroad? While Nuremberg firmly established crimes against humanity in international criminal law, the political challenges of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) have prevented concerted international efforts to prevent atrocities in places such as Cambodia, the Balkans, Rwanda, and most recently, Syria. For the US to stand idly by while thousands of unarmed civilian are massacred has a negative impact on US interests—the nation’s moral authority is damaged, soft power eroded, national and often regional stability is degraded, trade relationships disrupted…etc. Yet these are rarely vital interests, and certainly not existential interests that would suggest the needful employment of ground troops for COIN and nation building operations. It is proper, however, for the US to take a leading role in preventing crimes against humanity wherever it can. Such action would ideally be initiated by the UNSC, but where political recalcitrance prevents unified action, the US must rally the willing and concerned within the international community to prevent further deaths. US support for human rights and humanitarian law should be unquestionable. Despots cannot believe they have free reign to operate as they will. Political and economic pressure may have significant impact overtime, as may efforts at brokering peace. While feasible military options in the past were generally limited to air strikes against established fixed targets of the despotic forces, the evolution of UAS technologies makes possible the enforcement of the peace through persistent surveillance and precision strike—all without the ill advised positioning of “boots on the ground.” If crimes against humanity can be prevented, they must be, but at the very least, the US should stand firm in its support for civilian populations affected in these conflicts.

As for advocating for democracy and human rights abroad, the US must be friends to reformers everywhere and be vocal in our support. Technical assistance to improve capacity can and should be provided where requested. It is in US interest to consistently support reform, and quit kowtowing to friendly autocrats. Yet democratization cannot be forced upon a people. When a nation is ready for democracy, it will rise up, and not before. We can name and shame abusive regimes, foster reform, befriend reformers, engage in scientific and cultural exchanges, broadcast our values—and we should do all of that aggressively—but that is the limit of our engagement.

THE WAY FORWARD

We don’t need a liberal foreign policy or a conservative foreign policy. National security is not a game of partisan politics. What is needed in America is a return to our core values. America is a country founded upon moral ideas—life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, property rights, and enumerated freedoms. We need to abandon the policies of COIN and preventive war that have sapped American strength and focus on our competitive advantages by advancing the efficiencies driven by our ongoing revolution in military affairs. As we refocus on diplomacy and economic cooperation and drastically reduce our employment of conventional forces, we will regain our footing. As we pursue our interests through a just, fiscally solvent, and efficient foreign policy we will reemerge as the world’s leading example of freedom, justice, commerce, and industry.

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