

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 30
Number 1 *Parameters Spring 2000*

Article 14

2-8-2020

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Recommended Citation

James E. Goodby & Kenneth Weisbrode, "Back to Basics: US Foreign Policy for the Coming Decade," *Parameters* 30, no. 1 (2000), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1971.

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Back to Basics: US Foreign Policy for the Coming Decade

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From *Parameters*, Spring 2000, pp. 51-56.

In the decade since the end of the Cold War, policymakers and pundits in the United States and, to some extent, in Europe have struggled with the problem of new organizing principles to replace older convictions and bring some logic to a complex world. Through fits and starts two normative beacons, globalization and democracy, have emerged as the talismans for US foreign policy. The Clinton Administration has sought to promote both objectives wherever it can, and take steps to forestall the failure of either whenever it must.

Admirable though these universal goals certainly are, they are not an adequate basis for a foreign policy. Furthermore, their application by the current Administration has raised considerable doubts that already have come to the fore of public debate. Where should we draw the lines of importance to US national interests?

The significance of the notion of containment during the Cold War was not its brilliance as a guide to action, but rather its utility as a readily comprehensible response to the geopolitical threat presented by the Soviet Union. Any attempt to establish a coherent foreign policy to support American strategic interests must be based on the ability of our leaders to apply broadly accepted basic principles to specific settings and outcomes in a way that matches our ends to our means.

That is why it is particularly necessary to revisit the fundamentals of American interests in the world now that some time has passed since the foreign policy uproar that accompanied the NATO intervention in Kosovo. It is a sad thing to acknowledge that the public definition of these interests by the Administration has led only to more confusion. Worse still is the prospect that US diplomacy will not be able to overcome a setback that, seen in the context of a lost post-Cold War opportunity and future dangers, may be more momentous than we now perceive. There is a risk, of course, in stating what should be taken for granted, but sometimes it is necessary to refocus our minds on what is important for the public to understand. As Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., advised, "We need education in the obvious more than investigation of the obscure."

For the first half of its history, the United States saw itself as a continental power. That is, the country's foreign policy, to the extent it had one, was to protect its mercantile interests abroad and to avoid foreign entanglements. The purpose was to consolidate America's geographic space for itself and to organize and integrate that space in pursuit of the national destiny.

This ended with the Spanish-American War, and the new course later was made irreversible with the Second World War. America was no longer a mere continental power, but rather, an island: it looked outward east and west across the two seas. The oceans insulated the United States to an extent from the limitations of European and Asian states, but they also served as connecting links, a fact recognized as the United States became the world's largest maritime power.

The maritime view of the world fit well with the rise of the United States to the position of the preeminent world economy and with accelerating advances in communications. The American presence became essentially worldwide while Americans preserved their own sense of separateness, popularized by contemporaneous historians as "American exceptionalism." The conjunction of late-blooming US industrial might and a breakdown of the European political balance led to a new international role for the United States, promoted, each in its own way, by Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. The isolationists of the 1920s and 30s objected to both formulations, but their movement was short-lived. By 1945 the United States was irrevocably a central actor on the world stage.

With the end of the Cold War, relatively few Americans think the United States still has the luxury of two oceans behind which to retreat to a highly selective involvement in foreign affairs. More are wedded to the maritime view of the world, but that overestimates, in today's context, our ability to maneuver anywhere at will and to achieve success through military and technological prowess. The image which has not yet sunk in, but will eventually, is that of the United States once again as a continental power but with the "continent" now the world itself. America today bumps up against many other nations. It is perhaps the nation with the most borders of all in a figurative sense. Because of that, we must continually build coalitions and alliances to secure our most basic interests. Today the US world position demands what Sir Halford Mackinder called the "landman" mentality, which emphasizes inseparability, interconnection, and equilibrium. This is not a mentality that is underpinned by separateness but by the fact of mutual dependence. Acceptance of this geopolitical reality and of the constraints that it implies is a fundamental first step toward designing a realistic foreign policy.

How can we operationalize our response to this new reality? To begin, policymakers need to distinguish more carefully among levels of interest, a simple notion promoted by almost all advocacy groups interested in public policy in the United States. And yet the most common error of policymakers is to fail to distinguish among our levels of interest, leading to an overcommitment of resources to a third-tier interest and, inevitably, to an undercommitment to higher-level interests. In other words, strategic or second-tier interests, if mishandled, can threaten vital or first-tier interests. But strategic interests, if well understood and acted upon, can support vital interests as well as make more likely the achievement of third-tier or lesser interests. The three tiers of interests, as many analysts would see them, are:

- Tier one (vital): homeland defense, to include threats to the well-being and way of life of the American people.
- Tier two (strategic): peace and stability in Europe and Northeast Asia, open access to energy supplies in the Middle East.
- Tier three (lesser): stability in South Asia, Latin America, and Africa; the spread of open markets favorable to US prosperity.

Admittedly, this is a geopolitical, not a universal approach. Foreign policy problems become important for us to the degree that they affect our most serious interests. This rule may diminish the gravity of foreign crises, but such events must not be allowed to put in jeopardy more important national priorities.

A chief responsibility of American diplomacy should be to identify and exploit areas where US interests are shared by other countries while containing, if necessary by accommodation, those areas where they may be in conflict. No country, even one as strong as the United States, can accomplish its ends without the cooperation of others, and the Clinton Administration generally has recognized this. Frequent reference to the United States as the world's only superpower is but a rhetorical exception.

The primary strategic interest of the United States, in spite of a changed world, is fundamentally the same as it was when American power burst onto the world stage at the turn of the last century: the prevention of a threat from a rival Eurasian state committed to territorial expansion. A threat from Eurasia might result from either the dominion of a single power or an unrestrained competition for influence, resources, or territory among medium-sized powers--for example, India, Iran, or Turkey. Some have argued that the only source for stability in this complex environment should be a constantly shifting balance of power resembling the European state system of the 18th and 19th centuries. The United States, in this view, would serve as the balancing agent of last resort, much in the manner that Britain acted toward the European continent. However, it is improbable that the American people would support the obligations and costs required to sustain such a role. American leaders are far more beholden to the opinion of the people, and will be only more so in the years to come.

What is needed instead is a meaningful Eurasian security community. What does this mean and how should it be brought forth? The geopolitical idea of Eurasia joins the two principal American strategic interests as outlined above. (The third, open access to Middle East energy supplies, probably will not survive as a second-tier interest to the middle of the next century, although a commitment to Israel almost certainly will.) Both the Second World War and the Cold War proved the stability of Europe and Northeast Asia are strongly linked, and that the United States is a key

factor in each. This reality has not changed. What has changed so fundamentally is the political and military balance of power in Eurasia. No longer dominated by a single empire at the core, the states of Eurasia, including those of the Pacific rimland (namely Japan and Korea), exist in a precarious and insecure conglomeration of regional relationships. This equation cannot perpetuate itself indefinitely. As the world's largest power and the only one that has the ability to affect outcomes throughout Eurasia without immediate impact on its own region, the United States should lead the way in building a new balance by way of a Eurasian security community. There are three essential pieces of this balance:

- Stability and cohesion in Europe and between the European Union and the United States.
- Mature and effective relations among China, Russia, and the West, to include, first among all others, a regular forum to oversee reduction of the risks of nuclear weapons.
- Systematic patterns of consultation and policy coordination of the states benefiting from the global economy, and positive relations between those states and the developing world.

The policies that would further those aims are manifold, mainly diplomatic in character. George Kennan and George Shultz have used the metaphor of "gardening" to describe the process of keeping bilateral relations in good order. This is what is required of Washington with respect to the European Union, Russia, China, and Japan. Some specific mechanisms might be mentioned here:

First, once the present-day domestic uncertainties have cleared, NATO and Russia should formalize their cooperation in a joint committee for strategic stability cochaired by minister-rank representatives. The agenda should include parallel measures to reduce the nuclear confrontation that still exists. And in light of President Yeltsin's April 1999 announcement on reversing the Gorbachev-Bush agreement on tactical nuclear weapons, a control regime for non-strategic nuclear weapons should be given much higher priority.

Second, a similar committee should form with specific responsibility for Northeast Asia. The committee would include the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and Korea. It would oversee cooperation in areas of mutual interest, such as consideration of a regional early warning system and a regional program of missile defense (that includes China and Russia), joint regional military exercises, technology transfer issues, and so forth.

Finally, American support for the United Nations is essential. The main threat to American security is not intrastate conflict but the threat of powerful nations which see the United States as an enemy. The wisdom of post-World War II statesmen in creating the UN Security Council is still relevant today.

As regards intrastate conflict, the biggest concern for the major powers, both individually and collectively, will continue to be how to deal with it in ways that are consistent with international norms while satisfying public concerns about the humanitarian aspects. It is clear that responses to such contingencies--and they will continue to arise--can succeed only if made through the cooperation of a quorum of major powers. If any one of the major powers opposes action, the action is far less likely to be successful, however strong the initial determination may be to make things right. This is why the function of the Security Council should not be written off as an unwieldy obstacle to getting things done. The United States should act against or in spite of it only in extreme cases. If the Security Council has not functioned optimally, then serious effort must go into improving its effectiveness. Diplomacy, especially multilateral diplomacy, is a hard, tedious task, but it is absolutely necessary to give international actions the legitimacy they need. Critics may characterize this view as overly legalistic, but no alternative to major power consensus, save a military imperium throughout the world, has presented itself with any convincing capacity for effectiveness.

This essay presents only a brief sketch of what should be undertaken after a considerable period of forethought. But if these areas are handled well, problems in other areas of concern, namely the Near and Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and possibly other regions, can be approached with greater likelihood of success.

A plea for a return to basics does not mean to suggest that the United States intentionally is neglecting its major-power relationships and allowing fads to overtake responsible policymaking. Most practitioners would say they are doing the best job they can under difficult circumstances, and most of us who continue to admire their integrity as public servants do not envy their workload. Yet the public perception and the private reality suggest worrisome disorganization and a certain degree of impatience with a foggy conceptual framework. It is time to return to the basic

elements of the American role in the world and raise the level of public understanding of them.

American strategic planners and policymakers cannot afford to be arbitrarily selective about where and when to engage US power. This would make our foreign policy aimless and lose the support of the American people for engagements overseas. A proper strategic picture should set out each of America's interests and how they best may be achieved with the cooperation of other powers. However, this cannot take place until the executive and legislative branches of government resurrect the workable partnership in foreign affairs that once existed, but which exists no more. Checks, balances, and even inertia play an important role in domestic affairs where the purpose of government is to regulate interests but not intrude too deeply into the lives of citizens. But in the "vast, external realm," these qualities are deadly to effective policymaking.

There is no constitutional reason why an active role for the United States as the key player in a Eurasian security community cannot be consistent with both the values and the domestic priorities of the American people. That role requires a President with strong interest in foreign affairs and an ability to convince Congress of the soundness of his foreign policy. It also requires an effective bureaucracy to implement policy, namely a clear executive role for the Department of State in the exercise of diplomacy and a clear advisory role for the National Security Council in coordinating the roles of other departments and agencies to establish consistency of mission and objectives.

In summary, the basic elements of American foreign policy should be, first, to get major-power relationships right; second, to be more attentive stewards of political cohesion among the major powers; and third, to cultivate more sophisticated diplomatic means to stave off or contain secondary conflicts. The average citizen is capable of understanding these goals if they are presented clearly and honestly; however, government must take the lead.

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Reviewed 8 February 2000. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil