

American Foreign Policy for the New Era

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A NEW AMERICAN POLICY: SUMMARY

What foreign policy should the United States adopt in the post-9/11 era?

The balance-of-power concerns that shaped U.S. foreign policy during 1917–1991 have faded sharply. The nuclear revolution has made conquest among great powers impossible.

As a result other great powers now pose far less threat to U.S. national security than in the past. At the same time a grave new threat to the security of all major powers has arisen: terrorism with weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This threat stems from two phenomena: the spread of WMD materials and technology, and the rise of terrorist groups that aspire to mass killing.

Threats to the global commons, especially global warming and threats to global public health, also seem increasingly serious.

These new dangers—the WMD terror danger and threats to the global commons—pose a common threat to all major powers. And they cannot be defeated without common action by the major powers.

Three policies are called for:

- The world's major powers should organize themselves into a new concert—along lines of the 1815 Concert of Europe—to take united action against WMD proliferation, terrorism, and threats to the global commons. The U.S. should lead in creating and sustaining this new concert.

- The U.S. should reorient its national security policies and programs toward counterterrorism and countering WMD spread, while downgrading efforts to prepare for war against other major powers.
- Programs to protect the environment and global public health should be given higher priority in U.S. foreign policy making.

AMERICAN STRATEGY, 1917–1991: KEEP EURASIA DIVIDED

During 1917–1991 American national security policy focused on maintaining the political division of industrial Eurasia. American policy makers feared that any state that controlled all of Eurasia could exploit its economic resources to build a war machine that could project power across the Atlantic and threaten the United States. Hence the U.S. persistently opposed the expansion of the lead candidates for Eurasian hegemony, Germany and the Soviet Union. Specifically, the U.S. fought bitter wars to contain Germany during 1917–18 and 1941–45 and waged a long cold war to contain the Soviet Union during 1947–1991.

Terrorism was not considered a significant threat to the United States during 1917–1991. Very little terror was directed against the U.S. during these years. After 1945 nuclear proliferation was considered a worry but was subordinate to geopolitical concerns.

Threats to the global commons seemed remote. The global climate seemed unthreatened. U.S. public health was seen as unconnected to wider global public health.

THE FADING OF GEOPOLITICAL THREATS AFTER 1991

The danger that a Eurasian hegemon might appear and threaten the U.S. has largely disappeared since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

There is no plausible candidate for Eurasian hegemony now on the horizon. China comes closest, but not very close. Someday China may rival the United States in military power but that day is decades away.¹ And even then China will pose little geopolitical threat to the U.S. for three reasons.

- If China does someday rival the U.S. in military power, geography will make it a markedly less plausible candidate for Eurasian hegemony than was Germany in 1917 and 1941. Unlike Germany, China

is not adjacent to large, vulnerable industrial regions. China therefore does not have targets within easy reach. To conquer Japan, the biggest prize in the region, China must cross a vast water barrier.

- If China nevertheless does somehow conquer other industrial states it will gain little strength by doing so. This is because post-industrial knowledge-based economies are far harder for a conqueror to harness to aggressive purposes than the smokestack economies of the 1940s and 1950s. Post-industrial economies depend on free access to technical and social information. This access requires some domestic press freedom and access to the internet, foreign publications, and foreign travel. But the police measures needed to subdue a conquered society require that these channels be controlled because they also serve as carriers of subversive ideas. Thus key elements of the economic fabric now must be ripped out to maintain control over conquered polities. This is a marked change from the smokestack-economy era, when societies could be conquered and policed with far less collateral harm to their economies. The assumption that underlay old geopolitical thinking, that conquered economies could be harnessed to build up the war machines of their conquerors, is no longer true.
- The nuclear revolution makes great powers virtually unconquerable. Any state with a secure nuclear deterrent is secure from conquest, as its attacker would face annihilation. And a secure deterrent is far easier to maintain than to threaten, so nuclear powers can defend themselves even against states with many times their economic power. As a result the U.S. could defend itself against China even if it greatly grew its economy, then conquered its neighbors, and then found a way to harness their industrial power for war. Under such exceedingly far-fetched circumstances China still could not conquer the U.S. without first developing a nuclear first-strike capability against the U.S. This is a pipedream and will remain so. It would require an implausibly overwhelming Chinese economic superiority over the U.S.

For these reasons geopolitical threats should have far less priority in U.S. national security policy than they have held in the past. Other major powers are not the danger to U.S. security they once were.

THREE NEW DANGERS: WMD SPREAD, WMD TERRORISTS, THREATS TO THE GLOBAL COMMONS

As geopolitical threats have faded three dangerous new threats have emerged.

WMD Proliferation. Global security of nuclear weapons and materials has seen major crumbling in recent years.

- The Soviet collapse made Soviet nuclear weapons, materials, and scientists more available to terrorists.
- The advance and spread of technology is lowering the cost of developing WMD. Even poor states like North Korea can now afford it.
- New nuclear proliferators have appeared on the scene. In the early 1990s we saw large counter-proliferation successes: South Africa abandoned the bomb, Argentina and Brazil dropped their nuclear programs, and Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus dismantled their Soviet-legacy nuclear arsenals. Momentum seemed to be with the non-proliferation regime. More recently things have ominously reversed. India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons in 1998, North Korea has developed nuclear weapons, and Iran has moved further to develop them. Pakistan's nuclear technology has been spread to others by the renegade leader of the Pakistani nuclear program, A.Q. Kahn.

WMD Terrorists. A new breed of terrorists who aspire to mass killing has appeared. The 1990s saw for the first time the emergence of terrorist groups—the Japanese group Aum Shinrikyo (1994/95) and al-Qaeda (1990)—that aspire to mass killing and would use nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction if they had them.

Before the 1990s students of terror assumed that no terrorists aspired to commit mass murder. The watchword was that “terrorists want a lot of people watching not a lot of people dead.” Terrorists were assumed to be operating in the realm of pragmatic politics in pursuit of defined political aims.

The appearance of Aum Shinrikyo and Al Qaeda proved this assumption wrong; some terror groups aspire to vast destruction. In 1998 Osama Bin Laden proclaimed that “to kill Americans . . . civilian and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible.”² A former al-Qaeda press

spokesman, Suleiman Abu Ghaith, even claimed that al-Qaeda had a right to kill four million Americans, including two million children.³

Together these developments face the United States with a serious threat of nuclear terrorism.

Emerging dangers to the “global commons”—to common interests including the global climate and public health. If unchecked, climate change could wreak large damage to civilization. This danger threatens a common human possession, the global climate. Others common threats include the spreading H5N1 avian flu virus, other emerging infectious diseases, and emerging anti-biotic-resistant infectious diseases. These dangers seem minor—until they arrive. (The 1918 flu epidemic killed 675,000 Americans, more than both world wars combined.) They pose a common threat because they will ignore borders and threaten everyone if they develop. The danger they pose is growing with growing interaction between the human and animal world, and with irresponsible use of medicine.

Climate change and emerging infectious disease pose common problems that must be addressed in common with other states. Unilateral action by individual states will not be enough.

AN AMERICAN STRATEGY TO ADDRESS THE NEW THREATS

A U.S. strategy to counter these new threats—WMD terror and threats to the global commons—should have three elements.

Create and sustain a concert of cooperation among the world’s major powers. In 1815 the victorious powers that had defeated Napoleon created a Concert of Europe to address the continuing danger of mass revolution, which they saw as a threat to them all. Under the Concert they agreed to cooperate to repress revolution wherever it appeared while also limiting conflicts among themselves.

Today the world again faces a threat from below, this time from terrorists. The world also faces other common threats, especially to the climate and to global public health. Again a concert among the major powers is required to address these shared dangers.

A concert is both possible and necessary. A concert is possible because the major states pose little threat to each other—far less than before the nuclear revolution. As noted above, nuclear weapons have

made conquest among major powers almost impossible. As a result the competition for security that fueled much conflict among great powers in the past has greatly abated. Nuclear weapons have freed the major powers to cooperate against other dangers. Because the powers are less dangerous to each other they can more easily make common cause to solve other problems.

A concert is also possible because all major powers are threatened by WMD terror and by threats to climate and health. All major powers therefore have an interest in defeating these threats, so all have an interest in cooperating against these threats. None will be tempted to say, “those problems threaten you, not us, so we won’t help,” because they threaten everyone. All will be inclined to cooperate as long as they understand this.

A concert is necessary because WMD proliferation cannot be contained and terror cannot be defeated without common action by the world’s great powers. Nor can the climate be protected or global health be preserved by unilateral action by one country.

Counter-terror policy is only as strong as its weakest link. If terrorist groups find haven anywhere, as they did in Afghanistan in the 1990s, they can flourish. Every door must be shut to them, every haven denied. This requires broad-front cooperation by all the world’s major states. There can be no defectors. If any major states defect from the global counter-terror effort, the terrorists can find the haven they need by playing one power against another. The only way to avoid this is for the U.S. to forge a concert and relentlessly maintain it by leading it forward.

Common action is also required to protect the climate and health. No state can protect itself by its unilateral action from the harmful effects of fossil-fuel burning by other countries. No state can fully protect itself from pandemic diseases that emerge from other societies. Instead a key defense against pandemic lies in collective public health measures to prevent the emergence of pandemic disease wherever that might occur.

Other U.S. policies should be subordinated to the need to create and maintain the new major-power concert.

Most important, the U.S.-China rivalry must be kept within bounds so that Chinese-American cooperation against proliferation and terror is maintained.

As noted above, China will likely rise in relative power for some years, perhaps becoming a peer competitor to the U.S. someday. A major

power shift is underway. History warns that the two strongest powers often clash, as each is the main threat to the other. History further warns that power transitions are dangerous and hard to manage.

If China's rise is mismanaged the danger of a U.S.-China cold war, or even a hot war, will arise. Such conflicts would spell disruption of U.S.-China cooperation against WMD terror and other common threats. Such disruption would pose a grave threat to U.S. and global security. Instead the U.S. must manage China's rise in a way that maintains U.S.-Chinese cooperation against these common threats. The U.S. must achieve its prime traditional geopolitical goal—preventing the emergence of a hegemonic Eurasian superstate—in a way that allows it to achieve its newer goals as well.

Building and preserving a concert will also require a buildup of U.S. diplomatic skills, and a rebuilding of American standing in the world. American statecraft skills have atrophied in recent years as the State Department has been poorly funded. American standing around the world has plummeted as publics and elites have reacted in allergic fashion to the policies and rhetoric of the Bush administration.⁴ Rebuilding American standing will require effective U.S. public diplomacy and a new approach to foreign policy—above all a more respectful tone from U.S. leaders, and full U.S. consultation with other governments before taking important action. The Bush administration has often left other governments feeling unconsulted or disrespected.⁵ It has provoked resentment by taking a bullying tone with others. Some in the conservative movement have further raised eyebrows by talking of the need for an American empire. The U.S. cannot lead a global concert until these errors are corrected.

Redirect U.S. national security resources toward the new security threat: WMD terror. Declaratory U.S. national security policy should identify the threat of WMD terror as the prime threat to U.S. national security.

U.S. national security programs should also be redirected toward the WMD terror threat. This requires a reallocation of resources away from preparations for war against other great powers and toward the many functions—most of them non-military—that defeating terror and containing the spread of WMD requires. These functions include:

- Public diplomacy to shape global opinion on terror-related issues and toward the United States.

- Efforts to lock down loose nuclear weapons and materials in Russia and elsewhere.
- Preventing or ending civil and interstate warfare around the world. This task is important because terrorist organizations feed on warfare. For example, al-Qaeda exploits the Israel-Palestinian conflict, the India-Pakistan conflict in Kashmir, the conflict in Iraq, the conflict in Chechnya, and past conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor and Somalia in its propaganda, and it uses some of these conflicts as a training ground for its terrorists. Hence the U.S. should be a peacemaker everywhere. To do this it must develop its peacemaking capacity.
- Preventing failed states and ameliorating state failure. Terrorists breed in failed states, hence the U.S. must build its capacity to prevent them and ameliorate them.
- Strengthening all elements of homeland security. This should include reform of the FBI, integrating local police, fire departments, and public health labs into homeland security, imposing better control on U.S. borders, securing U.S. nuclear reactors, chemical plants, railroads and ports from terrorist attack, and rewriting U.S. insurance laws governing terrorist incidents to give businesses an incentive to harden their infrastructure against an attack.

Elevate the protection of the global environment and global public health to higher priority in U.S. foreign policy. These goals are viewed as minor concerns in U.S. foreign policymaking. They deserve far higher priority, commensurate with their importance to the national welfare.

CONCLUSIONS

Never in modern times have the world's major powers had less reason to compete with each other or more reason to cooperate to solve problems that commonly threaten them all. Current conditions resembles the condition of 1815, when all the major powers felt endangered by a common threat from below—mass revolution—and cooperated against it. Today the world's major powers again are jointly threatened by a threat from below—WMD terror—and by threats to their shared climate and global public health that they must address together. These challenges threaten the world in collective fashion and cannot be solved by the unilateral

action of a single power. It is therefore both possible and necessary for the world's major states to cooperate to address these problems.

Accordingly, the U.S should lead in developing and sustaining a broad cooperation against these common problems. It should also reorient its foreign and security policy to address them. These policies are the best path to making America safer.

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NOTES

1. Developing this point are the chapters by Joseph Nye and Edward Steinfeld in this volume.
2. In 1998, quoted in *Anonymous, Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2002): 59.
3. In 2002 Abu Ghaith announced on an al-Qaeda-affiliated web site, www.alneda.com: "We have a right to kill 4 million Americans—2 million of them children—and to . . . wound and cripple hundreds of thousands." Quoted in Graham Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* New York: Times Books, 2004): 12.
4. A recent survey of global views of the United States is "America's Image Slips, But Allies Share U.S. Concerns over Iran, Hamas," Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 13, 2006, retrieved from <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=252>. This survey reports that favorable opinions of the United States have fallen sharply since 1999/2000 and are at new lows in some important countries. Specifically, during the period 1999/2000–2006 favorable views of the U.S. fell from 83 percent to 56 percent in Britain, 62 percent to 39 percent in France, 78 percent to 37 percent in Germany, and 75 percent to 30 percent in Indonesia.
5. In 2003 *Newsweek's* Fareed Zakaria wrote: "Having traveled the world and met with senior government officials in dozens of countries over the past year, I can report that with the exception of Britain and Israel, every country the administration has dealt with feels humiliated by it." Fareed Zakaria, "The Arrogant Empire," *Newsweek*, March 24, 2003. Jorge Castañeda, Mexico's reformist foreign minister until January, 2003, said of Latin American officials: "We like and understand America. But we find it extremely irritating to be treated with utter contempt." (Ibid.) A retired senior Turkish diplomat, Ozdem Sanberk, remarked that U.S. abrasiveness helped prevent Turkish support for the 2003 U.S. attack on Iraq: "The way the U.S. has been conducting the negotiations has been, in general, humiliating." (Ibid.)