



PART ONE
Getting our
House in
Order

CAN WE REBUILD A NATIONAL SECURITY CONSENSUS?

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American foreign policy is at a crossroads. The nation is fiscally challenged, politically polarized, frustrated by 10 years of conflict, and confronting relative decline—a daunting set of conditions in which to establish a foreign affairs agenda. Successfully navigating the shifting domestic and international landscape at this crossroads will be critical to securing U.S. interests. Reviving a consensus on how to do so is almost as important.

The prospect of U.S. military intervention in Syria has highlighted the fragility of our long-standing national security consensus. When our nation is deeply fragmented, we are prone to strategic drift, as happened during the Vietnam War. In contrast, a shared vision for U.S. national security across a core, bipartisan cross-section of the American public and their elected officials enables us to be agile and purposeful, as it did immediately after World War II. A U.S. foreign policy consensus is also important to the friends and allies it helps to assure and to those whom it helps to credibly deter.

Consensus, however, will not be easy.

CHALLENGES TO CONSENSUS

Strengthening the consensus on the U.S. role in the world requires the nation to address at least four interwoven challenges. First, most Americans are understandably concerned foremost with solving problems at home. Education, infrastructure, health care, and the economy are issues of primary importance to many American families. The past 10



years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan and the lack of an urgent, existential threat to the United States have compounded this desire to look inward. It is unsurprising that in a 2012 Pew Research poll, 83 percent of respondents agreed that we should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems at home, up from 73 percent in 2002.¹

Second, resources are scarce. The U.S. economy is still recovering and entitlement spending is consuming an increasing proportion of the federal budget. Fewer dollars are now available for defense, diplomacy, and development—indeed, for any discretionary spending. The effects of these fiscal constraints go beyond the reduction in our ability to execute a given security strategy. They also increase the scrutiny over the strategic choices themselves. Should the United States try to improve its domestic infrastructure (currently graded a D+ by the American Society of Engineers), ensure its military can defeat any potential future adversary (a difficult and costly goal), and/or increase security at U.S. borders? How should we pay for what we want: raise

tax rates, cut entitlements, reduce military benefits? Winston Churchill best captured the sentiment for our times with his famous quip: “Gentlemen, we have run out of money. Now we have to think.”

A third challenge to consensus is a deepening division in American culture over the appropriate balance between privacy and security. On the left and right, the government is suffering from a trust deficit in its handling of information and technology. In the center, there is disgust over the very leaks that have fueled the distrust. Such divisions are longstanding in American history, but in the information and unmanned age, they are likely to multiply. Left unresolved, these threats to the public’s trust in U.S. foreign and security policies will constrain the president and Congress by creating confusion over fundamental principles regarding the role and limits of government.

Finally, perhaps the greatest challenge to a shared vision of the U.S. role in the world

1. Pew Research Center, “U.S. Foreign Policy: Key Data Points from Pew Research,” July 19, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/key-data-points/u-s-foreign-policy-key-data-points/>.

is the disintegration of bipartisanship. This disintegration reflects the factors cited above and many others beyond this author's scope. Bipartisanship has long been strongest in the national security arena. This owes in part to sustained levels of public support for an active U.S. role on the world stage, which paradoxically remains at levels on par with the public's desire to focus more at home.² Yet as the chasm between political parties widens on other issues, agreement on national security matters suffers in the wake.

BUILDING A SECURITY CONSENSUS

Though the above challenges to consensus are perhaps obvious, their resolution is not. The United States is at an important crossroads in its foreign policy. With two years until the next presidential election, 2014 is a propitious time to begin a public discussion on the key principles, interests, and approaches that should guide American security policy. Some of the key questions to address include:

- What are our nation's interests in the world, and what relative value do we assign to each of those interests?
- Does the United States need to be a leader in the world to secure those interests? What does it mean to lead in a period of austerity?
- What domestic investments and choices are critical for making the United States stronger abroad?
- What costs and risks is the United States willing to bear in its rebalance to Asia? The fight against al Qaeda and its affiliates? Preventing Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons?
- Where can investments in development and diplomacy offset more costly investments in defense? Where can private industry assist and what efforts are inherently the federal government's to pursue?
- How can we be more effective in working with our allies and partners across the globe? What must the United States be prepared to do alone and what should others provide in support of common interests?
- What principles should guide leaders in balancing the need for improved security with the rights of American citizens?

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These issues must be weighed and discussed by citizens across the nation. We will not achieve the needed foreign policy consensus through an insular debate inside of Washington, D.C. Although a public dialogue alone is unlikely to overcome the challenges to consensus, it is a necessary step in forging a coherent and convincing narrative for America's desired role in the world. Armed with a common understanding of our purpose and principles, the United States will be positioned to forge a national security approach that sustains the kind of active role in the world that most Americans seek. ►

2. Ibid. In 2012, 83 percent of respondents agreed that it is best for the future of the United States for it to be active in world affairs.