What does it mean to bridge the gap between academia and policy in international affairs? This has been the Journal's goal since its inception, but this issue we decided to tackle the question head on with our first-ever IR Scholars Forum. We asked the five international affairs scholars on our front cover—Francis J. Gavin of the University of Texas at Austin, Robert Jervis of Columbia University, John M. Owen IV of the University of Virginia, Marc Trachtenberg of UCLA, and Stephen M. Walt of Harvard University—to reflect on the relationship between the academic and policy worlds, and discuss how their own thinking about policy-making has evolved over the course of their academic careers. The resulting collection of essays in the IR Scholars Forum offers a unique look at their personal experiences as scholars and the opinions about policy those experiences have shaped.

In keeping with this theme, we also spoke with Alexander Evans, a scholar-diplomat with the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office, to glean insight on the academia-policy divide from someone who has worked on both sides of the fence. From his perch in Washington, US Treasury Department’s Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, David S. Cohen, talked with us about dismantling terrorist financing networks.

Like the academia-policy divide itself, the articles featured in this issue consider the often-competing aims that influence a range of international affairs challenges: Paul Carroll of the Ploughshares Fund looks at US and Chinese objectives vis-à-vis North Korea; John Teton of the International Food Security Treaty Campaign calls for the global right for freedom from hunger as enforceable national and international law; George Mason University’s Patrick Mendis explores the strategic importance of Sri Lanka for Chinese and US policy in the Indian Ocean; and political consultant Michael Morrison considers the emerging role of think tanks in China as a potential means of predicting Chinese foreign policy.

International affairs scholars and policy makers may never move in exactly the same orbits, but they would certainly work to each other’s benefit if they moved closer. In order for that to happen, though, both sets of actors need to be able to see each other without the blinders and biases of their respective professions. It is our hope with this issue that we crack that door open a little more widely.

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Editor-in-Chief
2011–2012
IR SCHOLARS FORUM

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As a discipline, social science does a lot of soul searching. What qualifies as social “science” and what does it really tell us about how the world works? The methodological and professional demands of academics on the one hand don’t always square with the realities of the individuals and institutions about whom social scientists are busy theorizing. This dynamic is clear in political science generally, and international relations in particular.

To consider this problem in a way that is both interesting and illuminating, we wanted to provide a platform for a nuanced, first-person perspective from international affairs scholars themselves. The goal was to explore the complicated relationship between academia and policy, and how we might better understand it. The result was this issue’s IR Scholars Forum, in which the Yale Journal of International Affairs invited five top scholars to weigh in on the following question: In what ways has your own scholarly work in international relations given you insight into how policy-making should be conducted? The responses we received are as diverse as the backgrounds of the respondents. Francis J. Gavin compares the misunderstandings and the ebbs and flows in the scholar-policy maker relationship to those of a romantic affair. Robert Jervis discusses his evolution from a strictly rationalist way of thinking about international relations to one that allows for the psychological and ideological tensions that effect world leaders. Marc Trachtenberg talks about the importance of power politics in determining policy outcomes, a move away from understanding international conflict in stark moral terms of “right and wrong.” John M. Owen IV stresses the balance between ideas and power, how states can use ideology much like a tool, and the international implications for power distribution. And Stephen M. Walt takes a candid look at his own scholarly history to explore the role of IR theory in policy-making more broadly, laying out suggestions for how to help close “the gap.”

In the essays that follow, the IR Scholars Forum offers readers a unique opportunity to see how these academics think about their work, their discipline, and how these impact their world.
International Affairs of the Heart
Francis J. Gavin

International relations scholars and foreign policy makers often look at each other’s profession the way a bored spouse might gaze upon a forbidden but tempting lover. To the policy maker, the impenetrable walls of the Ivory Tower seem mysterious and exotic, a place of deep reflection and refined dialogue where they can escape the vicious and politicized battles that often dominate government life. The scholar, meanwhile, is easily seduced by the allure of putting ideas into action, making a difference in the world, and escaping the arcane and trivial disputes that dominate the academic scene. The colleagues of both disapprove. Academics, the smitten policy maker is told, are impractical and arrogant, obsessed with theory, and clueless about the demands of making real-world decisions under enormous pressure. The philandering scholar is warned by tales of the corruption of power that comes with abdicating the purity of scholarship. Despite this advice, the temptation to stray is strong, and there has even been a happy marriage or two between academics and policy makers as a result. But for the most part, the relationship has been marked by longing, disappointment, and misunderstanding.

Like the history of love and romance itself, this relationship waxes and wanes over time. In the immediate postwar years until the middle of the 1960s, policy makers and scholars were quite open about their amorous associations. The nuclear revolution ushered in the so-called “Wizards of Armageddon,” and the line between academic strategist and government official often blurred.¹ The disaster of Vietnam, however, ended the affair, leaving both sides bitter and wary, chastised by colleagues for their folly, and forbidden from any further intellectual embrace for decades to come.

Lately, there is interest anew in rekindling the spark. The puritanical Cheney-Rumsfeld years, where policy makers and academics took great pride in their utter disregard for each other, revealed that the virtues of chastity and fidelity are often overstated.² Then along came Barack Obama, former professor elected commander in chief, a man of decision and ideas reviving memories in both professions of those halcyon times before Vietnam. Could it be once again like Camelot, a young but wise

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President John F. Kennedy and his advisors consorting with esteemed historians such as Arthur Schlesinger and learned strategists like Thomas Schelling?

Like many a case of the wandering eye, the cause for the flirtation is often dissatisfaction at home. Few would argue that national security and foreign policy-making processes are ideal. The pressures in the US national security environment are enormous, the rivalries are unpleasant, and the increasingly politicized atmosphere can be toxic. It is no wonder the so-called “life of the mind” in academia appeals to the beleaguered practitioner. But the contributions of foreign policy decision makers, regardless of their working environment in government, are nevertheless appreciated by the elected officials and parts of the larger public they work for. Scholars of international affairs rarely feel such appreciation within universities. For decades, the historical profession has marginalized the study of military and diplomatic history, decimating its ranks. Similar trends are emerging within political science, where an obsession over methodology and arcane theoretical disputes threatens to crowd out qualitative studies of international relations.

There are also deeper misunderstandings between the two professions about what it is that each actually does and can offer to the other.

There are also deeper misunderstandings between the two professions about what it is that each actually does and can offer to the other. Several notable efforts to improve the relationship have emerged, largely within academia. I have come to the conclusion, however, that many of these otherwise admirable initiatives mischaracterize and misdiagnose the problem. The first issue is that academic- and policy-bridging programs often conflate the problems within academic fields with the question of policy relevance. For example, scholars often assume that the effort to amend their internal disciplinary pathologies—such as many political scientists’ obsession with methodology and its reverence for what has been called the “cult of the irrelevant,” or historians’ distaste for the study of power and those who wield it—will lead to policy makers taking a greater interest in their work. But few outside the Ivory Tower care or even understand these myopic, field-specific preoccupations. While ending “methodologism” and curbing political correctness may be good things in and of themselves, those fixes will not necessarily lead to more and better interaction between policy makers and academics, nor improve US foreign policy.

The second, and larger problem is the operating assumption underlying several of these efforts to “bridge the gap.” The academics involved often contend that the real issue is a poverty of ideas in Washington, DC, and if only policy makers would read and implement the latest international relations scholarship, US foreign policy would benefit. This assumption is borne out in many of the proposed solutions to close the gap, which focus on access: finding ways to interact with and share ideas with policy makers, and to place research in venues that are more accessible to those in the Beltway. In other words, the message is that the ideas coming out of the Ivory Tower are just fine; they only need to find their way into the inboxes of key decision makers.
I don’t think this is the right way to look at things. At the risk of alienating some of my Ivory Tower colleagues, I think the real problems lie on the supply side, not the demand side. My experience has led me to the conclusion that many policy makers would be quite grateful for useful knowledge, and don’t have any problem accessing it. Yet much of the scholarly production is not particularly helpful to them. What do the offerings of the Ivory Tower look like to the interested policy maker? Surveying the field, she is soon caught between the Scylla of aggressively pure theory valued only by political scientists, and the Charybdis of paralyzing indeterminacy that marks much historical scholarship. Neither Kenneth Waltz nor Hayden White is of much use to the overburdened decision maker forced to make hard choices with grave consequences.

There is also an implicit assumption in academia that scholars are simply a lot smarter than policy makers. Whether true or not—and in my experience there are smart and less smart people in both camps—such an attitude would obviously be off-putting in Washington, regardless of one’s intelligence level.

Academics are from Mars, Policy Makers are from Venus

A tool for quarreling couples, married or not, is to imagine what life is like in the other’s shoes. There are several elements of the decision maker’s environment that are rarely appreciated by the professoriate. First, decision makers operate in a political world of competing interests and values. Effective policy is almost never the type of intellectually impressive answer that is developed in a vacuum, but rather emerges from a process that recognizes and mediates the conflicting desires of multiple actors. In other words, the most that can be achieved is often a “second-best” solution, and policy makers’ records should be assessed accordingly. Second, policy makers face radical uncertainty: policy is about preparing for an unknowable future. Every action produces a whole series of unexpected and unintended consequences that create their own future policy dilemmas, with interconnected linkages and ripples across space and time. There are few easy choices, and most decisions fall into what former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger called “51/49 judgment calls.” Third, the policies crafted and implemented by policy makers are consequential. In other words, the decision to act—or not act—can carry costs in terms of lives, livelihoods, and treasure. Policy makers are, as they should be, held professionally and personally responsible for the outcomes of their recommendations.

These three factors understandable lead to far different intellectual risk portfolios for those making decisions than experts on the outside critiquing their actions. Sometimes this makes government officials frustratingly cautious, unwilling to change course or deviate from past policies. It is very difficult to simply end without notice even those policies largely recognized as failures, nor is the ship of state adept at dramatic changes or shifts. As a consequence, policy makers tend to focus on risks and dangers that scholars might dismiss as low probability events, resulting in policies
that appear overly reactive—circumstances few academics understand or appreciate. Sub-optimal outcomes, then, are not necessarily produced by a lack of intelligence or thought on the part of decision makers, who in the end should be judged on their own terms, recognizing the constraints and incentives of the political milieu in which they labor.

Academics do not provide much that is helpful to the decision maker navigating this kind of environment. Instead, if she is a political scientist or economist, she might offer bold predictions based on a parsimonious—or overly simplistic—theory that attempts to explain how the world works. If he is a historian, he might offer a rich and interesting story, but when pressed, claim that the tale is context specific and offers no general rules the policy maker might apply to a different situation. If the academic is of the hybrid variety, such as a grand strategist, he or she might sit around suggesting that the best policies are those where means are properly aligned with ends, as if this were some kind of profound insight not recognized by every semi-competent policy maker within the first week on the job. Given this offering, policy makers can be excused for not rushing to the nearest university seeking guidance.

The scholar’s environment could not be more different. Often working alone, and with no “line” responsibilities, the academic only navigates the norms of the profession and its journals. Such a rarified world can lead to a false sense that policy choices are binary and simple. “Bomb Iran; don’t bomb Iran,” as if the decision will be determined solely on intellectual merits. And if the academic is wrong—and we know as a group they are as apt if not more likely to be wrong in their predictions about world affairs than average citizens—he or she is rarely held accountable or punished. In fact, without mentioning names—we know who they are—the so-called “thought leaders” within international affairs seem to be rewarded more for boldness than correctness. Policy makers see what the Ivory Tower incentivizes, and this is bound to make them skeptical of what the most policy-inclined scholar can offer.

Before being labeled a self-loathing academic, let me point out that the protected environment of the university is ideal for doing lots of things other than offering policy advice that nonetheless have profound, long-term policy implications. Professors teach the next generation of citizens how to think systematically and logically, develop critical reasoning skills, and articulate their thoughts and arguments in clear and convincing ways to others. American universities top the world when it comes to undertaking the research that changes how we understand and navigate it.

Indeed, one of the true benefits of the US higher education system is its protection and distance from power and politics. There are great risks in being too close to power, seeking to please those in decision-making positions, or tailoring research and training too close to the demands of public policy. Both in the United States and abroad, the story of academics working with those in power is as apt to be tragic as productive. Historian Bruce Kuklick argues that during the height of the academia-policy affair in the 1950s and 1960s, the ideas of American defense intellectuals often “served to legitimate but not to energize policies.” Often, “fashion was more important than validity” and policy intellectuals who “professed deep understanding” actually “groped in the dark.” This helps explain why in my field, history, the appetite for renewing
the relationship is frowned upon. As Jill Lepore has pointed out, “The American historical profession defines itself by its dedication to the proposition that looking to the past to explain the present falls outside the realm of serious historical study.” Many within the Ivory Tower find Stanley Fish’s advice sound: “Don’t confuse your academic obligations with the obligation to save the world; that’s not your job as an academic; and don’t surrender your academic obligations to the agenda of any non-academic constituency—parents, legislators, trustees or donors.”

Couples Counseling

Does this mean there is no hope for “bridging the gap?” I don’t think that is the case. Most policy makers are acutely aware of how little they know, and how much help they need. The world is unstable and the future uncertain. The United States faces extraordinary global challenges and a wider array of threats and opportunities than ever before. Furthermore, the number and type of key actors on the world stage has expanded. Policy makers must assess complex problems while operating in an increasingly polarized environment under tremendous time and political pressures. Within government itself, the institutional capacity to generate quality analysis, to say nothing of research, is often compromised. Long-term planning, as opposed to reacting to the day-to-day news cycle, is less and less a priority within the halls of power. There was a time when many high quality think tanks, such as Brookings, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, supplemented the efforts of government by providing near academic quality research. But the same trends that have politicized and polarized large parts of the foreign policy establishment have also affected, negatively, the think tank world.

Thus, there is a need, or “demand,” for help. What can the Ivory Tower do?

A good start— but one traditional international affairs scholars may not appreciate—is to develop a better understanding of the types of knowledge needed by policy makers. The most interesting issues in international relations today, and likely in the future, demand deep technical, scientific, cultural, legal, economic, and historical knowledge. If any “bridging the gap” initiative is to really attract the attention of policy makers, it should be able to say something meaningful about topics like climate change, cyber-security, post-colonial history, global public health, or the drivers of technological innovation, to give just a few examples. Government is filled with people who can debate the various arguments over what the military rise of China portends for the future, but far fewer who understand what China’s demographic compression, its environmental vulnerability, or its complex ethnic make-up means for the future of world affairs. Finding experts outside of government to make sense of Shanghai’s water table might be a higher priority than reading another article about China’s efforts to build a blue water navy.

Think of all the information needed for a US Secretary of State to properly assess the consequences of the 2011 multi-billion dollar deal negotiated between Exxon-Mobil and Russia’s Rosneft to exploit oil and gas reserves in the Arctic, a transaction that had all the appearance of a state-to-state negotiation between Russian Prime
Minister Vladimir Putin and Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson. Theories of great power war or the democratic peace don’t strike me as the kind of knowledge that is remotely useful to a policy maker trying to figure out how to respond. Instead, insights about energy technology, global finance, international law, and climate change would be far higher up on the list. One thing international affairs scholars might do is act as a “platform” or gathering place for these fields, to mediate and match-make between academia and Washington. A program that included a wide range of fields—climate scientists, cyber experts, anthropologists, social psychologists, etc.—would likely be most welcomed.

Universities house an extraordinary amount of subject knowledge and sheer brainpower, and the national interest would be served if this expertise could be brought to bear on important policy problems. Scholars of international affairs have a role to play here, but in order to succeed they must be as willing to work with their colleagues in Physics, Computer Science, Law, and Psychology as their partners in policy planning and the National Security Council.

Stop Sneaking Around

If the gap is to be bridged, policy makers and academics need to have a better understanding of the world each lives in, dispel the myths each clings to, and develop a more realistic appreciation of what the relationship can be. The bridge must also be widened to include disciplines in the university other than political science and history. Furthermore, scholars in those fields must come to terms with the fact that the trends making their disciplines less policy friendly are unlikely to be reversed anytime soon. An amicable divorce and a new union, whereby policy-interested historians and political scientists leave their respective fields (and invite others to do so as well) to create a new one, is an obvious answer. Though not without their own problems, schools of public policy and international affairs could act as a platform/halfway house for a revitalized field of international affairs strategic studies. There is little doubt such an arrangement would be a success: the most popular courses on many campuses are the ones taught by policy-interested scholars of international affairs, and important external constituencies including donors and politicians have been supportive of this kind of work.

In this new world, stripped of illusions and multiple loyalties, there is much that the scholar and policy maker can offer each other in an open and honest relationship. They have much in common. In foreign policy, the structure of international politics allows little freedom of movement, creating a suffocating world of equifinality. Who better than international relations theorists to help decision makers frame and categorize structural constraints and identify the causal drivers of world politics? The policy
maker is also tormented by the uncertainty of contingency. Who better to help guide a policy maker through that uncertainty than the “ambulance chasers of disruption and surprise,” historians? Even the differences I mentioned can be the source of attraction. The ability to evade the constant pressures of time, politics, and conflicting interests that plague practitioners allow academics to think longer term, to assess broader and deeper causes, and to challenge the core assumptions behind policy. Those type of insights would likely be of most aid to decision makers.

Would this renewed pairing of academics and policy makers lead to an ideal marriage this time around? Like all couplings, it would depend upon how much each partner put into the effort, whether shared interests and true differences were understood and respected, and whether both sides empathized with the other. Even if the relationship did not end in nuptials, it could surely lead to a deeper friendship, to the betterment of both.

NOTES


2 Perhaps the most interesting reflection of this decline of interest is when the Bush administration—and the public at large—largely ignored the (arguably prescient) arguments against a US invasion of Iraq advertised in the New York Times and signed by some of the most significant “realists” in the international affairs community. See “War with Iraq is Not in America’s National Interest,” New York Times paid advertisement, September 26, 2002.


6 The best, to my mind, is the National Security program of The Tobin Project, directed by Steve Van Evera, http://www.tobinproject.org/research-inquiry/national-security; and the Bridging the Gap project, run by American University, Duke University, and the University of California at Berkeley.

7 For an otherwise excellent piece that identifies problems within the political science discipline as a key reason for the less than ideal relationship between government and the ivory tower, see Bruce Jentleson and Ely Ratner, “Bridging the Beltway-Ivy Tower Gap,” International Studies Review (2011) 13, 6–11.


10 This phrase was made famous by Alexander George, in his important book, Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 1993).

11 During a recent visit to the US Department of State, I noted that there were many top international affairs journals, including International Security, in the waiting area outside the director of the Policy Planning Staff’s office.


US universities held eight of the top ten spots, and seventeen of the top twenty, in a recent ranking of the world’s best research universities. See “Academic Rankings of World Universities,” available at http://www.arwu.org/ARWU2010.jsp.

Kuklick, Blind Oracles, 15.


The best proposal to do just this is one Steve Van Evera has put forward: “Needed: A New Academic Field—International History, Politics, and Policy, January 5, 2012 / Draft 1.1. For a panel on “History and Strategy” at the University of Texas, Austin meeting on “History, Strategy, and Statecraft,” Jan. 7–8 2011, Austin, TX.

I have been interested in politics, especially international politics, for as long as I can remember. The times in which I grew up and my personal surroundings were permeated by politics. I was born in 1940, so the end of World War II and the beginnings of the Cold War were topics of dinner-table conversation. The fact that my family was deeply interested in politics and, like most middle-class New Yorkers, quite liberal, ensured that what the political parties were doing would also receive a great deal of attention. Although I was not old enough to worry about the relationship between policy and scholarship, I was always gripped both by trying to figure out why events were unfolding as they were, and what the United States should do about them.

Indeed, the central IR question of my youth remains one of my primary concerns today, although my views about it are, I hope, more sophisticated and definitely less certain. In the late 1940s, the pressing US foreign policy issue was how to explain the increasing tensions between the United States and the USSR—what the United States should do to cope with what was generally perceived as threatening Soviet moves without getting into a war. The main debate was over whether an arms buildup and a stiff diplomatic position on the one hand, or conciliation on the other (or, of course, a well-designed combination), would achieve the best results. At the time, and for many years thereafter, I inclined toward the former position.

It may not have been a coincidence that my interest in the subject deepened during the Eisenhower years. In that period, Democrats criticized the administration for maladroit diplomacy, including missing opportunities for negotiation, as well as for neglecting American military strength. In retrospect, both claims are questionable, and I wonder if my budding foreign policy preferences were influenced by partisanship and my desire to join fellow Democrats in finding as many grounds as possible to criticize the Republicans.
The fundamental question that I think we need to start with when analyzing or seeking prescriptions for most foreign policy disputes is whether the hostility is a reflection of underlying conflicts of interests, or whether it is at least in part a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Over the subsequent years, I have given different answers to the question of whether the Cold War was motivated by each side’s drive for security in an anarchic and uncertain world (the security dilemma), but have been consistent in my belief that the question is important for both theory and policy—and not only in this case. Indeed, the fundamental question that I think we need to start with when analyzing or seeking prescriptions for most foreign policy disputes is whether the hostility is a reflection of underlying conflicts of interests, or whether it is at least in part a self-fulfilling prophecy, created by each side’s attempt to gain security. Of course, it is rarely as simple as one thing or another. States can have sharply conflicting goals but the reason may be precisely a search for security. Thus one of the main explanations for why Japan felt it needed to dominate Asia in the 1930s (the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” as the Japanese called it) was that Japanese leaders sought economic self-sufficiency, something that was needed to protect the country in what was seen as a likely future war with the West. In one way, this was a security dilemma: Japan needed control over the raw materials that were lacking in the island in order to feel secure, and the United States and Britain were loath to let Japan control China and Southeast Asia. But to say that this situation was a security dilemma implies that the combination of an understanding of the other side’s position and good statesmanship would have allowed the conflict to be avoided, or at least not to have led to war. Yet in this case, it is far from clear that this was true. Conceivably, the West could have convinced Japan that war was avoidable if Japan pursued what the West considered reasonable policies, making an acceptable arrangement possible. Even in retrospect, though, it is hard to think of ways in which Japan could have been made secure or its assumptions about likely future conflict could have been changed, rooted as they were in the previous history of Western domination of China and a refusal to treat Japan as an equal.

In similar fashion, it is quite possible that neither greater hostility nor greater conciliation on the part of the United States would have brought the Cold War to an end—a peaceful end—sooner. As long as the Soviet economy grew and its leaders had faith in its system, they would not have quietly accepted American domination even if the United States had followed a policy less yielding than the one it did. On the other hand, greater conciliation might have produced temporary détente, but the emphasis must be on temporary: I believe Soviet leaders would have sought to expand their influence as long as the United States retained its capitalist ideology, which was by definition hostile, and as long as they saw opportunities to hasten the trajectory of history toward its pre-determined end in the “triumph of communism.”
Nevertheless, it makes sense to ask how a conflict could be ameliorated or ended, and whether the two sides’ objectives really are irreconcilable. Of course, it can be more complicated than that, and goals may be reconcilable in theory, but not given the constraints of the real world; or they may be reconcilable at some points during a conflict, but not at others. These questions come up with regard to the pressing issues now facing the United States and its allies on the one hand, and Iran and North Korea on the other (not that the answers are necessarily the same in the two cases). Iran denies that it is seeking nuclear weapons, but for the purpose of this article, let us assume that it is. The question, then, is why these two countries want nuclear weapons: are they seeking to increase their regional influence (something the United States is pledged to resist) or are they largely driven by the desire for security, in significant measure, against perceived American threats (a goal the United States could accept)? Other motives are possible as well, most obviously domestic politics and the seeking of status and prestige. One can argue that looking at motives should be secondary because the United States’ concern is how the behavior of these countries will be affected by their gaining (or in the North Korean case, increasing) a nuclear stockpile. A focus on consequences rather than motives would point to the possibility that a country could be motivated by the desire to expand, but on gaining nuclear weapons could discover that it cannot behave differently, or even that it must be more cautious now that it is the potential target of a nuclear attack. Conversely, a country might initially seek only security, but once it has nuclear weapons, its ambitions might grow. But whether we try to assess motives or predict consequences, what is crucial here is whether a conflict can be ameliorated and the nuclear weapons program brought to an end by measures of conciliation, cooperation, and security guarantees. If so, sanctions and threats are likely to increase the other side’s drive to acquire nuclear weapons because they will be taken as indications that the United States is indeed a menace and must be deterred.

Barring a happy ending to the US interaction with Iran and North Korea, we are likely to debate the causes of the failure for years to come, just as we still debate not only the Cold War, but the origins of World War I. Part of the reason is that the nature of the interaction can change over time, most obviously as attempts to reach agreement fall apart, such as with North Korea. Here we clearly see how perceptual dynamics can compound the security dilemma, and perhaps put a solution beyond reach. The United States believes that North Korea reneged on its agreements of 1994 and 2005. There is much to this, but American officials do not appreciate the extent to which their country also reneged, especially on the 1994 bargain. In international as in individual behavior, actors want to think well of themselves, and they can rarely give an objective account of their own actions, particularly those that could be seen by others as harmful or indicating bad faith. Leaders might be better off if they were more cynical, which would enable them to see that despite good intentions, they, like all mortals, often behave badly.

This last point links to two others that extend beyond the security dilemma: emotion and ideology. Marc Trachtenberg explains that in the course of his study of history and international politics, he came to see that “the logic of a system based on
power, a system where emotion and ideology did not play a dominant role, accounted for a lot more than I had imagined.” My own studies have moved me in the opposite direction, although this is in part a function of our different starting points. In my early views, emotion and ideology counted for very little; I kept my focus on power and logic, as modified by the cognitive limits on human rationality. When I wrote *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* in 1976, I drew on the previous decade’s work in psychology, which, partly in reaction to the psychoanalytic approaches of the 1930s and 1940s, had banished emotions from human thought. I should have realized at the time that this was a blinkered view of life, but did not. As my thinking evolved, however, and the more I looked at the Cold War, the more I saw a large role for ideology. More importantly, I began to follow the trend in psychology in moving away from an exclusive focus on cognition. As later work in psychology remedied this deficiency, and I thought more about some of the processes I had observed, I saw a much larger role for emotions as well, especially the need for people to avoid confronting painful value trade-offs, something I had earlier attempted to shoehorn into purely cognitive terms.

In fact, it is often too painful for decision makers to fully confront the harm they have done to others, or the extent to which their behavior might convey untrustworthiness. So it is not surprising that each side attributes the breakdown of agreements to the other’s bad faith and misbehavior. This refusal to see oneself in a negative light is of a piece with the tendency to avoid sharp value trade-offs. Psychological comfort is gained at the cost of distorting reality.

The foreign policy errors that follow are legion. To take just one of the most recent and consequential examples, in 2002 and early 2003 members of the Bush Administration could not bring themselves to realize that the occupation of Iraq was likely to be long and costly because doing so would have brought home to them the obstacles in the way of the venture on which they were embarking. Feeling, as I believe they did, a high sense of threat—even if many of us disagreed—they brought their assessments of other factors such as the likely course and consequences of the occupation into line in order to gain psychological and political support for their position.

The role of emotions and resulting biases in perception contribute to the very different perspectives with which countries view the world and each other. Occasionally, international politics is described as similar to a game of chess. Yet there is much deception in international relations. Realizing this, others have employed the analogy of poker. But I think a much better analogy can be found in the Japanese short story and movie *Rashomon,* which vividly portrays scenes perceived very differently by the multiple participants in them. Likewise, international relations practitioners perceive few interactions in the same way as their counterparts. Furthermore, decision makers are slow to comprehend that others do not necessarily see the world and them as they do. The security dilemma can be explained in part by the fact that actors often live in very different perceptual worlds.

**The security dilemma can be explained in part by the fact that actors often live in very different perceptual worlds.**
This propensity extends beyond security, and indeed at its extreme can throw into doubt the fundamental notions about interaction that are the foundations for both deterrence theory and the security dilemma. Internally generated impulses can override external stimuli; internal preoccupations can drown out a concern for what others are saying and doing. This means that, as Marxists and others have observed, the deep roots of a state’s foreign policy can lie in its domestic economic, social, and political system. The desire of democratic leaders to gain and retain power can guide foreign policy; concentrated and well-organized interests can trump or constitute the national interest; struggle and compromises within the bureaucracy can shape the information and options displayed to leaders, and in parallel, guide the way a policy is implemented. The external world is glimpsed only dimly and in distorted form, and states may be reacting more to themselves than to others. Although deterrence theory and the security dilemma interpret arms competition differently, they both see states reacting to what others are building and doing. Indeed, states always justify their foreign policy in those terms. But this may be more of a rationalization—sometimes without leaders being aware that this is the case—and the driving forces may be lodged within the state’s own political economy.

Political scientists and policy makers on the one hand and historians on the other seem to have developed different perspectives on this point. Retrospective accounts by the former, although not denying the importance of the external world in determining a state’s foreign policy, stress the power of domestic pressures and the complexities of hammering out policies in the bureaucracy. Indeed, it is surely a truism that the US government spends at least as much time negotiating with itself as it does negotiating with other countries—and the domestic struggles seem even more bitter. These accounts by political scientists and the participants themselves—without denying all role for international interactions—nevertheless imply that they are almost always muddied and muddled. By contrast, in recent years many historians have argued against the older tendency to write national histories of foreign policies, opting instead for multi-archival research and transnational histories. These perspectives are of great value for focusing on interactions across borders, but in their quest to avoid national parochialisms may miss the extent to which countries and policies are parochial.

Motivated biases and domestic sources of foreign policy combine so that a leader’s need to absolve his or her policies and country from responsibility for a course of action that could potentially go wrong can lead to the belief that other states will not be influenced by that action. Thus, returning to an aspect of the security dilemma, leaders compelled to increase their country’s arms will often believe that other countries will not feel threatened by this because the state’s benign intentions are clear beyond doubt. The responsibility for any arms race, therefore, will lie in the other state’s misperceptions. Similarly, those who urge a belligerent policy will often respond to the argument that this might lead to war by claiming that such an outcome will occur only if the other state wants it, and that if the other state is indeed bent on asserting its position by force of arms, conciliation cannot avert a conflict anyway. If this analysis is correct—and sometimes it is, as with Hitler—then the internally generated impulses on the opposing side are too deep and powerful to be deflected and therefore a belligerent
policy may be the right one. But the fact that this argument has often been used as a justification for foreign policy should make us suspicious.

As this discussion implies, it is hard for political scientists to know when to take decision makers’ beliefs and claims at face value. On the one hand, it is too easy—and condescending—for us to use hindsight to assert that we can readily penetrate decision makers’ political facades in order to understand their true motives. On the other hand, professed beliefs often are rationalizations to serve political and psychological ends.

Professed beliefs can also be the result of an inability to fully think through an ambiguous and complex situation, and to find a good way to reach foreign policy goals. Historians may be more sensitive to this than political scientists, since they are trained to unravel the odd ways in which events unfold and to expect historical ironies. Let us take some examples from the Nixon administration’s foreign policy—not to imply that he and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were particularly blind, but, to the contrary, to argue that even people with such skills and experience often find that their policies work themselves out in surprising ways.

From the start, Nixon and Kissinger understood four truths: the Johnson administration’s arms control plans could lead to a prohibition of missile defense systems without reining in weapons that could attack strategic nuclear forces, a combination that would leave the United States—and perhaps the USSR—vulnerable to a first strike; the United States had major advantages in technology, and controls here probably were not in the American interest as well as being very difficult to implement; there were links between arms control negotiations and the general status of Soviet-American relations; and the rigid but porous nature of the American bureaucracy required foreign policy to be led from the White House, with much of it kept secret from the government as well as the public. These understandings produced dramatic foreign policy successes, but in some cases took the country toward outcomes that Nixon and Kissinger had feared, and in other cases produced desired results but through unanticipated channels.

Nevertheless, the Nixon administration ended up following much of the arms control path of the Johnson administration before it, agreeing to ban effective missile defense while leaving unrestrained the ability to attack strategic forces. The result would have been American vulnerability had the administration’s pessimistic assessments of Soviet capabilities and intentions been accurate. They were not, however. The administration was then saved from its worst nightmare not by intelligent policies, but by the fact that it had misjudged the adversary. Part of the problem stemmed from excessive secrecy and centralization. In his last-minute negotiations at the Moscow summit, Kissinger agreed to what he thought was a minimal expansion of the size of Soviet missile silos without understanding that this would in fact permit a new generation of much more deadly missiles, something the experts on the SALT delegation would have told him had he been willing to keep them informed.

The other major irony here was that while Nixon and Kissinger were correct about the linkages among various disparate issues in Soviet-American relations, they got the main factor wrong. They believed that arms control was more important to
the USSR than it was to the United States, and that the administration could therefore demand certain behavior from the USSR in other areas as the price for an arms control agreement. But as it turned out, the Soviets did not cooperate, especially in putting pressure on North Vietnam as the United States wanted, and in the end it was the SALT negotiations that improved Soviet-American relations and allowed for progress elsewhere, most notably over Berlin.

US policy regarding the division of Germany showed a similar pattern of misreading the situation. At the start of the administration, Nixon and Kissinger were confronted with troubling frictions generated by the West Germans’ desire to solidify their political connection to West Berlin. Without great significance in itself, this conflict was at best a distraction from Nixon’s broader foreign policy agenda, and at worst could lead to a crisis with the Soviet Union. Nixon and Kissinger also worried that West German Chancellor Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik of seeking improved relations with the USSR and East Germany could increase East German leverage over West Germany and erode its ties to NATO. Both the desire to deal with the immediate issues at hand and the need to maintain some influence, if not control, over West German policy led Nixon and Kissinger to proceed with negotiations over Berlin and German borders. Their goals were to stall, limit possible damage, and prevent Brandt from becoming too independent. Much to their surprise, however, they found that far-reaching agreements were within reach. Working more closely with the West Germans than they ever believed possible, Nixon and Kissinger succeeded in ending the tensions which had previously made Berlin and Germany the obvious and perhaps the only way World War III might have started (it is now clear, I believe, that Khrushchev’s placing missiles in Cuba was largely motivated by his desire to put pressure on the United States over Berlin). Furthermore, the increased economic ties between West Germany and its neighbors to the east led not to the latter gaining leverage over the former, as Nixon and Kissinger had feared, but to the Eastern countries becoming so dependent on Western capital that they lost much of their freedom of action.

Vision is of course easier with hindsight, but I think it is also easier for those who lack responsibility for policy. Politically and psychologically, leaders cannot afford to look at all sides to a question as academics do, to contemplate all the ways in which their policies could fail or produce unintended consequences, or to feel the full pain of sacrificing some deeply held values in order to gain in other areas. Scholars look with approval upon leaders who are clear-sighted, but while such people may resemble the desired image we have of ourselves, they may not actually produce the best policies.
THE IDEAS-POWER NEXUS
By John M. Owen IV

Insofar as I remember my own thinking before I was trained in political science, my natural inclination concerning political life was toward idealism. I tended to believe that ideas — especially political ideas or ideologies — were where the action was, and I assumed that ideologies motivated people more than material interests did. By “idealism” I do not mean the utopianism that political realists enjoy skewering: indeed, I was a sort of pessimist because bad ideas seemed to be winning in so many areas of the world. This pessimistic idealism may have come from my growing up during the Cold War with a father who was a formidable (and affable) anticommunist.

While in college, I spent a semester at a research institute outside of Vienna. This was in 1984, during the “new Cold War” of the first Reagan administration. The institute’s staff included Soviet and other Eastern bloc scientists and students. We all got along well enough as long as we avoided discussing politics. I took brief trips across the Iron Curtain into Prague and Budapest, and found people with the ordinary concerns of life but also deep misapprehensions about the United States. My time in Central Europe impressed upon me a more detached notion of ideas and international conflict, in which strife was caused less by the badness of communism — although bad it certainly was — than by the incompatibility of communism and democratic capitalism. Ideas still moved the world, but in a different way than I had thought. I published an op-ed article in my college newspaper suggesting that the root cause of the Cold War was Soviet resentment of American prestige.

I retain a basic idealist inclination, but being trained at Harvard as a political scientist forced me to take on board the constraining effects of material factors — chiefly, military strength and wealth. In other words, I had to come to terms with realism, in particular its emphasis on material power. Most realists are pessimistic concerning the possibility of permanent global cooperation and progress, and that sat well with my own inclinations. But realism, at least in its modern versions, grounds its pessimism in materialism, or the proposition that weapons and wealth, not ideas, are what international politics is all about.

My academic work has squared the circle by stressing the interaction between ideas and power. The ideas-power nexus has a great deal to do with foreign policy, as I shall explain below. My doctoral dissertation and first book concerned the so-called

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democratic or liberal peace, the finding that liberal democracies do not fight wars against one another. The democratic peace was an obvious case of ideas—in the form of a particular type of regime—inhibiting war. But unlike most writing on the subject, mine emphasized the tendency for liberal democracies to be suspicious of non-democracies and to want to democratize them. I titled my book *Liberal Peace, Liberal War.* Of course, sometimes suspicion of authoritarian states is warranted, and we should all be glad that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union are gone. Yet my point is that, as others had already noted, states inside a league of peace will not necessarily have pacific relations with states outside of it.

The tendency to promote one’s own domestic regime, I found, was not limited to liberal democracies. Monarchies, communist and fascist states, and—going further back into European history—Catholic and Protestant states all had used various means, including lethal force, to spread or preserve their own systems in other states. My research showed that governments engaged in foreign regime promotion not only because they believed it the right thing to do, but also because they believed it in their interests to do so. Under certain conditions, suppressing a rival ideology in a neighboring country could make them more secure domestically and it also could extend or protect their influence over that country more broadly. I published a set of articles and a book titled *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics* elaborating this argument.

That states or governments can use ideologies, ideas about the best way of life, to their advantage; that their interests can suffer if a rival ideology advances; that at the same time, they can truly believe that their regime, their way of life, is more just, more productive, and more conducive to human flourishing; that they might even be right about that: these I take to be significant insights for foreign policy. For they mean that the liberal countries that promote human rights, self-government, and free markets—the United States, in the main, but also Canada, the Europeans, Japan, and others—are affecting their own interests and those of other societies as well. They are redistributing power, whether they know it or not. The point may seem obvious, but its significance eludes many scholars and policy makers.

Let us start by looking at economic liberalization in those “other societies,” or those acted upon by the United States. Liberal democracies work through international organizations and other means to induce countries to open their economies to external goods and capital. When a country does open its economy, some of its citizens win and others lose. That conclusion is straight out of international trade theory: firms with a comparative advantage will win; firms without a comparative advantage will lose. Thus potential losers from openness will use their political power to keep their nation’s economy more closed.

Less obvious, but no less real, is that democratization and political liberalization result in similar tensions between potential winners and losers in target states. Authoritarian rulers presumably violate human rights because they and their supporters
fear a loss of power and privilege were they to respect those rights. Freeing political prisoners, lifting censorship, allowing an ethnic group cultural autonomy – such moves normally would not threaten a liberal-democratic government, but they can compromise an authoritarian one. Thus when liberal democracies work through various means to enforce respect for human rights, those actors in the target state who benefit from violations of those rights stand to lose power.

Liberal democracies rightly see human rights as a matter of justice but they are also a matter of power. Muammar Qaddafi was wicked but he had an invincible interest in perpetuating the regime that sustained him, and in an instrumental sense he was rational to oppose liberalization and democratization. By the same token, some of his opponents were rational to favor more liberty and democracy in Libya because these things would enhance their ability to shape outcomes. After Qaddafi was ousted, the competition began over who would have political power in Libya. No doubt many of the competitors are persons of good will. But none of them are disinterested.

More important for international politics, the promotion of free markets, liberal rights, and democracy redistributes power at the global level. Whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, these policy tools are instrumental to US hegemony. How does that work? It is in the interests of any state to have as friendly a political and economic environment as possible — one that is less threatening to its security and more conducive to its accumulation of wealth. Autarkic states — those seeking economic self-sufficiency — tend to build empires because they require exclusive economic access to resources. By contrast, economically liberal states such as the United States seek to break up empires so as to maximize economic opportunities and partners abroad. They do not want to annex foreign territory; they want to open it up to their investors and merchants. US economic growth depends increasingly upon global growth. This is why the United States has been determined to maintain hegemony in the Middle East: not because, as some critics imagine, it wants to own more oil deposits or destroy Islam, but rather to maintain stable energy prices for the US and hence the global economy. Maximizing international economic growth is per se a good thing, and Americans are right to think so. What they often miss is that pressing other countries to open their economies has also helped extend the United States’ time atop the global hierarchy.

Likewise, promoting democracy and human rights has helped prolong US hegemony. If democracies do not fight one another; if they tend to be faithful allies; to produce fewer terrorists; to keep better control of their weapons of mass destruction; and vote with the United States in the UN General Assembly; then it is to US advantage, all else being equal, to have more democracies in the world. Democracy is endogenous with economic ties: liberal democracies tend to become more interdependent, to join more international institutions, and to be more reliable international partners in general. Liberal capitalist democracies have concrete material interests in cooperating with the United States. They also tend to share goals, measuring national success not by how feared they are, or whether their territory is expanding, or by how

Promoting democracy and human rights has helped prolong US hegemony.
far they are defying the United States; but instead by how fast their economies are growing, how healthy their democracy is, and so on. Joseph Nye calls the ability to get others to want what you want “soft power,” and he argues that it is a force multiplier for the United States—or any country that has it.⁸

The promotion and spread of individual liberty and free markets is related to more familiar instruments of US hegemony, namely international institutions. Most international relations scholars accept that institutions such as NATO, the WTO, the IMF, the G-20, and so on ease international cooperation by lowering transaction costs among states.⁹ But institutions do more than that. John Ikenberry argues persuasively that the United States constructed the predominant international institutions during and after the Second World War to facilitate cooperation but also to perpetuate US hegemony. These institutions resulted from bargains between the United States and other democracies that had less power. The United States agreed to bind itself to clear rules so as to make its outsized power more acceptable. In exchange, smaller democracies agreed not to challenge US primacy.¹⁰ In short, the United States has preserved its global primacy by, among other things, promoting liberal institutions within and among countries.

Now, none of this means that American and fellow capitalist democracies always work together in perfect harmony. For that matter, when the United States has disputes with subordinate members of the liberal-democratic club, US interests do not always prevail. That is clearly the case with Europe. The United States lost a major case involving Boeing Aircraft in March 2012, in which the WTO ruled that the US government pays massive illegal subsidies to the giant corporation, giving it an unfair advantage over Europe’s Airbus.¹¹ France and Germany, two major NATO allies, actively tried to block the US-led war in Iraq that began in 2003. Sometimes fellow democracies are quite aloof; India tilted toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War, though its economic and security ties with the United States have grown robustly since the early 1990s.

Neither is it only the United States that is helped by the spread of democracy and free markets. Other liberal democracies benefit as well. Most obviously, the nations of the European Union now enjoy greater security and prosperity than ever in their long histories, thanks in part to the shared domestic institutions that allow them to construct common regional institutions. More broadly, liberal democracies in Asia and Latin America enjoy benefits from US hegemony, including economic growth and a resulting entrenchment of electoral democracy. (Africa and the Middle East have not conformed to this happy story. African democracy has not corresponded to higher economic growth, and, apart from the anomalous policies of George W. Bush, the United States has not promoted liberal democracy in the Middle East.)

Non-democracies can benefit as well, if they enact the right policies. In fact, since the 1980s, authoritarian China has reaped staggering economic gains from US hegemony. It has done so by abandoning Marxism (though not Leninism) and exporting to the United

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States and the many nations whose economies US hegemony has opened over the decades.

Notwithstanding all of these points, the promotion of democracy, free markets, and international institutions has sustained the US global position. Had the United States not been the activist global power it has been since the Second World War, it would have saved a great deal of money, but it would have foregone a great deal more money because it would have done without the trade, investment, and influence that it enjoys as a result. But the larger point I am making here is that the spread of what Americans and many others rightly regard as good things cannot be divorced from the perpetuation of US power.

Fellow liberal democracies are aware of the workings of US hegemony. Indeed, they probably understand hegemony better than we do, since they must endure slights and humiliations that Americans are not aware that they inflict. But liberal-democratic partners generally endure rather than oppose US hegemony. They must constantly think about the alternatives, and challenging US primacy would be costly and possibly bring about something worse. That is how hegemony works: it co-opts so that it does not have to coerce.

It is the countries that differ sharply with the United States on democracy, human rights, markets, or some combination of the three that reveal power is being exercised. These are the countries mostly likely to resist US hegemony and to try to construct alternative world orders. It is no accident that China is the country that has gone the farthest in this direction, via its increases in military spending and attempts to foster East Asian cooperation without the United States. Nor is it accidental that Russia has become much more resistant to US primacy since the accession to power of the non-liberal Vladimir Putin. In Latin America, it is Venezuela under the socialist authoritarian Hugo Chavez that is most determined to be out from under the United States. In the Middle East, it is the Islamic Republic of Iran that is most bent on driving the Americans and their client regimes out and in establishing an alternative regional order.

What does recognition of the entanglement of US power with freedom and justice have to do with foreign policy?

Let me start by noting that few in the foreign policy world grasp, or at least acknowledge, this power-freedom entanglement. Hegemony is complex, even paradoxical. Those we usually call realists, whose analysis looks chiefly at military power, do not recognize the promotion of domestic and international institutions as force multipliers. Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense under the first administration of George W. Bush, was once asked his opinion of soft power. “I don’t know what that means,” was his reply, and he spoke for many. Realists have no problem with the United States seeking advantage because the world is a competitive and dangerous place. But to them, promoting US ideals offers no advantage. Power inheres in armies, carrier battle groups, drones, and the Green Berets; ideas about the good life or liberty have nothing to do with it. Realists regard the raid that killed Osama bin Laden as vindicating their position. Carefully calibrated military force, not the spread of freedom, makes America more secure.
On the opposite end of the political spectrum, the same fundamental mistake is evident. Many American liberals insist that power and principle are separate and must not be conflated. They are following the spirit of Woodrow Wilson. In April 1917, when Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany, he declared that “we act . . . not in enmity towards a people or with the desire to bring any injury or disadvantage upon them, but only in armed opposition to an irresponsible government which has thrown aside all considerations of humanity and of right . . . ” Wilsonians are like realists in that they separate power from justice. The difference is that Wilsonians want the United States to pursue the latter rather than the former. They are more comfortable with the use of hard power to vindicate human rights precisely because it seems the most disinterested. Thus, human rights activists Susan Rice and Samantha Power favored the NATO air strikes in Libya in 2011.

Wilsonians are certainly correct that the entwining of power and principle is uncomfortable and something not to be stressed in diplomacy. Imagine the international reaction if President Obama proclaimed, “America supports freedom for all of the world’s people, regardless of nationality. We believe everyone deserves liberty. But to tell you the truth, what we really like is the fact that a more democratic world helps keep America number one!” The candid speechwriter responsible for that line would be fired before he could board Air Force One for the flight back to Washington.

A third group, the so-called neoconservatives, does see the connection between power and justice; they know how international hegemony works. In the 1980s, Paul Wolfowitz pushed the Reagan administration to pursue a “freedom agenda” because it was not only the right thing to do, it would also help the United States beat the communist Soviet Union in the global Cold War. The same Wolfowitz, in the G.W. Bush administration, used that reasoning to argue for democracy promotion in the Middle East: democratizing Iraq would make the United States more secure. The trouble with the neoconservatives is that they did not appreciate the implications of their own analysis. If soft power is power then its exercise is bound to generate resistance and repulsion from those who are immune to it. The repulsion will be serious precisely because the stakes are as high as the neoconservatives say they are. Thus Iraq.

All three of these mainstream views come up short, then. How should policy makers take on board the insight that US power is entangled with the promotion of US values? Understanding how hegemony works does not yield a clear algorithm for US foreign policy. It does not mean that the United States should simply retreat from global involvement for fear of being hypocritical or self-serving; US liberal hegemony has helped people in many countries, as well as Americans themselves. Nor does it mean that the United States should go abroad, in the words of John Quincy Adams, “in search of monsters to destroy.” Soft power will encounter countervailing power.

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Understanding how hegemony works does not yield a clear algorithm for US foreign policy.
My scholarly work on the ideas-power nexus has taught me a much more general lesson: US policy makers should be aware that when they promote democracy, human rights, and markets—whether by force or by international institutional pressure—they are, indirectly but unmistakably, promoting US power. That is why America, even when it does the right thing, will never be loved, at least not for long. Policy makers skeptical of soft power should also be aware that promoting US power can sometimes entail promoting democracy, human rights, and market economics. Applying this twofold lesson will not magically end the world’s problems. Its application must vary with circumstance. But learning it is a matter of self-awareness, and that can only be a good thing.

NOTES

I started college at Berkeley in 1962 and by the end of my first year there I pretty much knew that I wanted to become an historian, and that in particular I wanted to study the history of international politics. There were times when I was not sure I would actually be able to spend my life in this field, but I did ultimately manage to get a good job and it still strikes me as a little amazing that society was willing to pay me, quite generously in fact, for doing something I really wanted to do.

What have I learned after working for half a century now as a diplomatic historian? What insights have emerged in the course of doing that work, not just about particular historical problems, but also about more general issues? Is there anything of a general nature that I can say now about how international politics works that I probably would not have been able to say if I had not done that work? And are there any general insights that have emerged from those fifty years of study about how policy should be conducted?

I think the answer to those two last questions is yes, and my goal here is to talk a bit about those kinds of issues. But I want to do that not by laying out one by one what strike me as the most important insights that have taken shape in my mind as I did that work. Instead I want to get at the issue in a more indirect way, by talking about how those insights took shape. And perhaps the key point here is that they did not emerge because I had been directly concerned with either set of issues. They developed as a simple by-product of normal historical work. For many years, in fact, I had no interest in international relations theory, and in those days if I had given it any thought at all, I probably would have doubted whether it would be of any use to me in my historical work. I also tended to shy away from policy issues. I more or less took it for granted that an interest in policy—a “presentist bias”—was a source of distortion and was to be avoided.

But as I did the historical work, I could hardly help seeing the larger implications of what I was learning. This, I now understand, is true of historical work in general. As you do that work, from time to time you come across things that are surprising, occasionally even astonishing, because they are so much at variance with what you had been led to believe. And since the views you had absorbed from the larger culture about those specific historical issues are embedded in, and serve to support, certain general notions about how international politics works—and are often linked to certain common ideas about how policy ought to be conducted—the broader implications are often hard to miss.

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Let me talk about how this process worked in my own case. My dissertation was on the reparation question about World War I. When I started to work on that topic, I fully accepted the conventional wisdom on the subject—the idea that the French wanted a harsh settlement; that the British and especially the Americans took a much softer line; that in the end the moderates were defeated; and that the reparations called for in the peace treaty with Germany—the Versailles treaty of 1919—were far beyond Germany’s capacity to pay. My initial goal was to try to understand why the French pursued such a policy. But as I went into the sources I began to see that the conventional wisdom on the subject was very deeply flawed. I remember in particular being stunned by one document I read in the Klotz papers at the Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine at Nanterre. In a meeting with his British and American counterparts, Louis Loucheur, the main architect of French reparation policy in 1919, actually attacked as utterly unrealistic the reparation sum the British had proposed. He could just about see, he said, how the Germans could pay the amount the Americans thought was appropriate, but as for the much larger British figure, he said “we leave to the poets of the future the task of finding solutions.”¹

But that was by no means the only finding that made me question what I had read in the standard accounts. During the peace conference, the French felt let down not just by the British but by the Americans as well.² And as a result, the French government actually approached the Germans to see if the two countries could work together, both during the peace conference and after the treaty was signed. That aspect of French policy had a certain proto-Gaullist edge: the French representatives stressed the point that France and Germany had a common interest in resisting Britain and the United States, and that only the “Anglo-Saxon Powers” would profit from Franco-German antagonism. They called—and in 1920 called openly—for a policy of “economic collaboration” with Germany, and at the end of that year proposed the Seydoux Plan, which would have established a reasonable framework within which the reparations could be paid and the two countries could work together.³

This of course was not all there was to French policy at the time, but the mere fact that this strand of policy existed at all was quite amazing to me because in those days I still thought that the standard historical interpretations could basically be trusted. And it was clear that the whole story had certain important implications. You would have expected the French, given what they had just suffered at the hands of the Germans, to have pursued a very harsh and indeed vindictive policy. But it seemed that political considerations were more important than the desire for revenge, that the logic of a system based on power where emotion and ideology did not play a dominant role counted for a lot more than I had imagined—although in those days I would never have put it in those terms.

Political considerations loomed large in part because the main alternative—the idea that international politics should be viewed in moral terms—had little appeal for the most important French leaders. For Clemenceau in particular, the whole idea that one could see what was “right,” make a peace on that basis, and simply assume that everyone would be willing to live with those arrangements, was utterly naïve. In a world shaped by centuries of struggle, it was foolish to think in terms of moral absolutes. It was...
natural that every nation would have its own idea of what was just, and there was no reason to think that they would all see things the same way. Political conflict was thus normal—to base the peace on one’s own notion of justice would not put an end to it—and one thus had to worry about the future no matter what sort of treaty was signed. One had to worry about how possible threats could be dealt with and about how political conflict could be managed—and one thus had to worry about the structure of power.4

Was the basic framework Clemenceau laid out the framework within which policy issues should be analyzed? This issue was particularly salient because Clemenceau was clearly taking issue with the main alternative way of approaching these basic policy questions, questions which Woodrow Wilson was then championing, an approach that emphasized moral considerations. So looking at the history almost forces you to think about the policy issues—that is, to think about whether you sympathize more with Wilson or with Clemenceau.

Those questions about fundamental policy, moreover, are linked to key issues of historical interpretation. Those who sympathize with Wilson’s approach do not blame Wilson or Wilsonianism for the failure of the peace of 1919; they say that because of European, and especially French, opposition Wilson was unable to implement his peace program after the war. But there are also those who dislike Wilson’s basic approach to foreign policy, and who blame Wilsonianism for the failure of the peace, and, to a certain extent, for the great disasters that followed. In some respects, their approach, with its distaste for moralizing and its emphasis on power-political considerations, is similar to the approach Clemenceau outlined at the time.

What this means is that one can get at those fundamental issues of policy by studying the historical problem. Was Wilson really defeated in 1919, or was the Versailles settlement in essence a Wilsonian peace? One can study these things by looking closely at the negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference. One can study what went on, issue by issue, looking at the line each major power took and trying to see which ones essentially got their way. To me, the results of that analysis were quite surprising. Wilson had no doubt that the Germans were responsible for the war; in his view, they had committed a great crime and they had to be punished for it. The “rule of law” meant that the law-breaker could not be allowed to get off scot-free; a “just peace” was one that recognized all this and was based on the idea that the Germans should be held accountable for what they had done. It was for that reason that Wilson—although his champions later tried to deny this—had no problem accepting the war-guilt clause and the provisions about the war criminals in the peace treaty. And it was for this reason that he overruled his advisors and accepted the inclusion of pensions in the reparation bill, more or less doubling the amount Germany was supposed to pay, even though this was clearly a violation of what the Americans had committed themselves to in the pre-armistice agreement—and would certainly be viewed that way by the Germans.5 But perhaps the most striking thing here was that while Wilson favored a punitive peace, he also seemed to assume it would be self-enforcing. He did not take the problem of
enforcement seriously, and when Germany began to resist the treaty, Wilson did not feel that force should be used against it. That combination, it seemed clear, was bound to cause problems: the Germans would be provoked and angered, but if they resisted, no one should do anything to keep them in line.

To me, the historical analysis certainly suggested there was something basically wrong with the Wilsonian approach to foreign policy. The opposite one — rooted in the idea that moral judgments in this area can be quite problematic, that international conflict is to be understood more in political than in moral terms, and that in such circumstances power-political considerations are bound to play a fundamental role in shaping policy — was far more attractive. Worrying about right and wrong (as though those issues had easy answers) and, by implication, concerning yourself with how justice should be meted out, only gets in the way if you’re concerned primarily with how interests should be accommodated, how a stable structure of power can be constructed, and how peace can be assured.

Studying the post-World War I period more generally gave me a strong sense that international conflict is to be understood primarily not in moral, but in political terms — that is, as resulting from a clash of policies about which moral judgments might be quite problematic. Indeed, you might be able to sympathize with both sides in a conflict — in the post-World War I case with Germany, for wanting to throw off the Versailles constraints and recover its power, especially since those constraints were explicitly based on the idea that Germany was mainly responsible for the war, but also with France for wanting to keep German power limited in order to avoid having to live in its shadow. In such circumstances, how can we say who was right and who was wrong? Are such terms even meaningful in this kind of context?

Doing that work on the period after 1918 was thus quite important for me in this context because these general points emerged with particular force. To be sure, I had already begun to think in those terms as an undergraduate. The whole premise of the course on European diplomatic history I took at that time was that wars don’t just happen because a particular country decides to commit an act of aggression. The premise was that to understand a war like the First World War, your goal was not to figure out who was to blame; your goal was to reconstruct the whole story leading up to the outbreak of war, and to try to grasp the logic underlying the course of events. The story might take years, even decades, to run its course, and in reconstructing it you want to put yourself in the shoes of the protagonists on all sides and try to see the world through their eyes — that is, try to see what they were reacting to, and how the choices they made were influenced by the sort of situation in which they found themselves, a situation shaped in large measure by the policy choices the other powers made for the same kinds of reasons. The idea is that you are not conducting a kind of judicial inquiry, but instead are simply trying to understand how a particular political process ran its course.
That perspective, which I had begun to absorb as an undergraduate but which really came alive for me when I did that work on the post-World War I period, struck me as important because it was so different from the assumptions about what makes for war that you find in the larger culture. People simply assumed that World War II—both the war with Germany and the war with Japan—was a clash between good and evil. One side was the aggressor and the other side had a purely defensive policy. The war in Europe broke out because Hitler decided to start it. The war with Japan was caused by the Japanese attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor. The Cold War was understood in much the same way. America and its friends were peace-loving democracies and pursued purely defensive policies. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was an aggressive, expansionist communist state.

That set of assumptions—largely unarticulated but no less widespread for that—about what international conflict was about, what one might call the “aggressor theory of war,” had major policy implications. It meant, in particular, that you needed to focus on what you might do if your adversary actually committed an act of aggression. You needed to focus on what it would take to deter a hostile power that was tempted to commit an act of aggression. It was natural, given such assumptions, that deterrence should become the be-all and end-all of strategy. But let me again emphasize the main point here: the whole strategy of deterrence was rooted in the aggressor theory of war, since it is aggression and only aggression that one seeks to deter. So if there is something wrong with that whole approach to understanding what makes for war, there must also be something wrong with the basic strategy that’s built on it.

And the more work I did, the clearer it became to me that that whole approach to the problem, rooted in the idea that international conflict is to be understood in essentially moral terms and that war was essentially a product of aggression was fundamentally wrong. I was coming to look at things in a very different way, in part as a result of my teaching. The main thing I taught for many years was a diplomatic history lecture course, and in teaching that class I felt I needed to try to make sense of the whole period I was covering. To do that, I of course used the general framework that had taken shape in my mind, especially as a result of the work I had done on the period after World War I, and applying that framework I began to question the conventional wisdom at various points. The whole notion, for example, that the war in the Pacific was caused by Japanese aggressiveness, pure and simple, struck me as quite problematic when I brought that conceptual framework to bear. Why on earth would Japan, bogged down in China as it was, attack the strongest country in the world, if the United States really was, as one famous historian put it, a country that asked “only to be left alone?” And here all my instincts as an historian began to assert themselves: it just couldn’t be that simple; there had to be a story here; the Japanese had to be reacting to something; the Americans had to be playing a more active role.
Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany were probably the two most aggressive powers in modern history, so if even in these cases the aggressor theory of war did not come close to capturing everything that was going on, one really had to wonder about how valid it was in general.

The Cold War was a much easier case: it was not hard to look at that conflict in essentially political terms. The key here for me was the argument Adam Ulam developed in his important study of Soviet foreign policy, *Expansion and Coexistence*. The Soviets were worried about Germany—especially about what would happen if that country became a nuclear power—and the great Berlin Crisis of 1958–62, the central episode of the Cold War, was to be understood in the context of those concerns. Ulam did not give much evidence to support that interpretation, but it rang true for me, and it became part of my (at first tentative) interpretation of the Cold War.

But because this sort of interpretation is in a sense imposed on the subject—that is, it goes beyond what the available evidence fully supports—you need to keep something of an open mind and do what you can to get deeper insight into the issue. It is in that connection that certain historical findings are of fundamental importance: these findings carry particular weight because they’re surprising, in the sense that they’re at odds with what you’ve been led to believe.

Let me give three examples of what I have in mind, all relating to US foreign policy in the Cold War period. The first has to do with President Kennedy. A lot of people take Kennedy’s inaugural address, and especially the reference to how the United States would “bear any burden” in the Cold War, at face value. But it turns out that this was not the real Kennedy at all; there was a huge gap, as there often is in political life, between rhetoric and reality. Kennedy was by no means a simple-minded Cold Warrior: he very much wanted to reach an accommodation with the USSR, and he made it clear to the Soviets in particular that he understood their concerns about Germany and was willing to accept Eastern Europe as a Soviet sphere of influence.
He also recognized that as soon as China got the bomb, which it did the year after he was assassinated, it would be impossible to defend Southeast Asia and the defense of that area was not a burden he was willing to bear in those circumstances.11

The second example has to do with US policy in the immediate post-World War II period. Here again the assumption was that US policy was rooted in ideological considerations, and that in particular the American government refused to accept the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and the establishment of communist police states in that region. But it is quite clear that in 1945 the Truman government was willing to accept the new realities in that part of the world, and indeed had little trouble accepting the division of Germany. This whole story took me quite some time to sort out, but I think the basic findings here are very solid. I was particularly struck by a comment President Truman made at Potsdam in July 1945. He thought we would “have a Slav Europe for a long time to come” and did not think that that would be “so bad.”12

The third example has to do with John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower’s Secretary of State from 1953 to 1959. Most people still think of Dulles as highly ideological and moralistic, someone who really thought of the communist world as forming a single monolithic bloc, and that the United States and Russia were engaged in a kind of zero-sum game. But it is quite clear that Dulles’s approach was much more sophisticated and power-politically oriented than we had been led to believe.13 China, in Dulles’s view, was by no means a Soviet satellite, and even in his first year in office he thought relations between Russia and China were somewhat strained. “The best hope for intensifying the strain and difficulties” between those two powers, he told the British and French foreign ministers in December 1953, was to “keep the Chinese under maximum pressure.” That pressure, which might include even military measures short of war, would “compel them to make more demands on the USSR which the latter would be unable to meet and the strain would consequently increase.”14 His highly ideological rhetoric, in particular about a monolithic Sino-Soviet bloc, is thus not to be taken at face value. It served an important political purpose. The calculation was probably straightforward: if war broke out between China and the United States, the USSR itself might be attacked. That being the case, the Soviets would have a strong incentive either to distance themselves from the Chinese or try to hold them back; the Chinese would resent it if the Soviets took either course of action, and tensions between those two powers would increase.

This is perhaps a little speculative, but the basic point here is quite clear. Power-political considerations counted for more and ideological considerations counted for less in these cases than you had been led to believe. And that in turn serves to deepen your general understanding of how international politics works, especially the role that power-political thinking plays in shaping the way international conflicts run their course.

The main idea here is that one has to look at an armed conflict as the outcome of a political process, unfolding over time, with its own logic, and about which moral judgments might well be quite problematic.
over time, with its own logic, and about which moral judgments might well be quite problematic. That idea, to my mind at least, has very important policy implications, and let me try to draw out some of them here. I just used the term “political process” and both words in that term are important in this context.

The word “political,” first of all, has a number of connotations: political as opposed to moral; political as opposed to military; political as implying that power considerations are important. Each of these distinctions is significant in policy terms. The whole idea that we should not think of political conflicts primarily in terms of who is to blame, that we should try to understand the logic underlying the course of events, means that we should adopt an approach that looks toward political accommodation: a *modus vivendi* is much easier to achieve when neither side engages in finger pointing, and both sides take a more sophisticated and perhaps more jaundiced view, one rooted in a certain sense for how the adversary sees the situation. The emphasis on power implies that we should always pay attention to power realities and power-political considerations—with “power” understood in a broad rather than purely military sense. The term “political,” in fact, implies that military considerations are of limited—although by no means negligible—importance.

I spoke before about the narrowness of the concept of deterrence, and about the problem of focusing excessively on those considerations (of a military nature) that come into play when a country is tempted to commit an act of aggression. But one sees a certain tendency to overemphasize the importance of military considerations on the left as well: the whole idea that “arms races” are important sources of international conflict, and that arms control is therefore of fundamental importance, is a good example here.

But the word “process” is perhaps of more fundamental importance than the word “political.” Many of the other things I’ve talked about are standard fare in realist thought, but this emphasis on process is, I think, one of the most important things an historian can bring to the table. The whole idea that a war is the outcome of a political process that can take years to run its course is natural to the historian because the historian’s job is to trace that process, but most people do not think in those terms. Most people, as I said before, think that the War in the Pacific can be explained by referring to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Even many political scientists think that when you look at a war, you can code one side or the other having “started” it, although in most cases things are not quite so simple. But if war is to be understood, as a general rule, as the outcome of a political process, then the goal of policy should be to influence the way that process runs its course by creating incentives and disincentives that could help shape the sorts of policies the other powers involved in the conflict adopt.

That point for me is absolutely fundamental. It implies, among other things, that one’s own policy should not be defined in absolute terms, but rather should be contingent on the behavior of one’s adversary. Instead of opting for a “hard line” or a “soft line” in any particular case, one should make it clear that the specific line one takes will be a function of what one’s adversary does. The basic idea here is somewhat counterintuitive: one can help shape events by pursuing an essentially reactive policy—that is, by making it clear that the ball is essentially in the rival power’s court. Indeed, adversaries and friends should have both something to fear and something to gain if
they behave one way or another. Otherwise, they have no leverage, no way of influencing the other’s behavior, and thus no control over the way the process runs its course. You might think this point is so obvious that you do not need an historian to make it, but it is surprising how often it is ignored in practice, US policy toward Iraq in the 1990s being a very good case in point.16

This whole way of thinking is rooted in the study of great power politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, when very few of us believe there is any real risk of a great power war, the discussion here might therefore have a certain antiquated quality. One might think that these ideas are not relevant to the world we now live in. My own feeling, however, is that the system still “selects out” actors who behave strategically because if they don’t, they stand a good chance, to use Kenneth Waltz’s term, of “falling by the wayside.” And the basic principles I’ve talked about here apply whenever people, to any significant degree, behave strategically. International conflict, and indeed conflict in general, has a certain logic. Historical work can help you see what that logic is, and when you see it, you’re in a much better position to think about policy.  

NOTES


2 The main problem was the unwillingness of France’s allies to accept a settlement based on the principle of “equality and community of sacrifice.” But at one key point, and on one important issue—the inclusion of pensions in the bill—President Wilson actually sided with the British; that decision resulted in a much high reparation bill than the French would have preferred. Loucheur made it clear to both Wilson and the British prime minister, David Lloyd George, that if it were up to the French, a strict interpretation of the Fourteen Points—that is, limiting the bill to reparation for material damages and excluding pensions—would be a better solution. By Loucheur’s own estimates, that would have meant that the total bill would have been less than $25 billion; the burden on the German economy corresponding to that sort of figure, although substantial, was by no means beyond Germany’s capacity to pay. But Wilson was not interested in that idea and ended up supporting the inclusion of pensions. When one of his advisors, John Foster Dulles, pointed out to him that the same logic that had ruled out war costs should also rule out pensions, Wilson refused to accept the point. “Logic! Logic! I don’t give a damn for logic,” he said, “I am going to include pensions.” See Trachtenberg, Reparation in World Politics, pp. 64–69, and Trachtenberg, “Reparation at the Paris Peace Conference,” pp. 41–42.


4 This sort of thinking was laid out most clearly in Clemenceau’s speech to the Chamber of Deputies on December 29, 1918.


11 Arthur Krock of The New York Times asked Kennedy in 1961 what he thought of the domino theory—“that is, if Laos and Viet-Nam go Communist, the rest of South East Asia will fall to them in orderly succession.” Krock noted that “the President expressed doubts that this theory has much point any more because, he remarked, the Chinese Communists are bound to get nuclear weapons in time, and from that moment on they will dominate South East Asia.” Krock interview with
Here, for example, is an extract from Dulles’s discussion of US foreign policy toward Germany in the National Security Council in February 1958: “Secretary Dulles began by stating his opinion that with respect to Germany the policies of the United States and of the Soviet Union have something in common—not that it was not safe to have a unified Germany in the heart of Europe unless there was some measure of external control which could prevent the Germans from doing a third time what they had done in 1914 and 1939. Secretary Dulles insisted that the Soviet Union would never accept an independent, neutralized Germany in the heart of Europe. He added that he was convinced of this fact from many private conversations with Soviet leaders, who had made it quite clear that they would never agree to the creation of a unified Germany unless it was controlled by the USSR. Nor, on the other hand, should the United States accept a unified Germany except as part of an integrated Western European community. We simply could not contemplate reunifying Germany and then turning it loose to exercise its tremendous potentialities in Central Europe. . . . We could not close our eyes to the fact that this great power must be brought under some kind of external control. The world could not risk another repetition of unlimited power loosed on the world.” Discussion at the 354th Meeting of the National Security Council, February 6, 1958, pp. 7–8, Declassified Documents Reference System (available online through subscribing libraries), item no. CK3100278522.

12 Extract from the James Forrestal Diary, entry for July 28, 1945, Forrestal Diaries, vol. 2, Forrestal Papers, Mudd Library, Princeton University. Also online at http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/trachtenberg/documents/forestall.html. This passage was deleted from the edited version of this diary entry published Walter Millis, The Forrestal Diaries (New York: Viking, 1951), p. 78. On this general issue, see my article “The United States and Eastern Europe in 1945: A Reassessment,” Journal of Cold War Studies, 10:4 (Fall 2008), and the H-Diplo roundtable that was devoted to that article (http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-X-12.pdf), as well as the first chapter in the Constructed Peace book.

13 Another example is the great importance many people during the Cold War period placed on what was called “strategic stability,” as though the “reciprocal fear of surprise attack” was ever a major problem in international political life. Insofar as any historical support was given for that theory, that support came from a particular interpretation of the coming of the First World War during the July Crisis in 1914. It turns out that that interpretation does not stand up in the light of the evidence. See my article, “The Coming of the First World War: A Reassessment,” in my book History and Strategy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). This, to my mind, is a good example of the way historical analysis can shed light on an important issue of policy.
I. INTRODUCTION

Most social scientists would like to think that their work helps solve important problems. For scholars of international relations, there is certainly no shortage of issues to address: ethnic and religious conflict, managing a fragile world economy, global terrorism, climate change, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, the Euro crisis, etc.—the list is endless. In this increasingly complex and still-contentious global order, one might think that scholarly expertise about international affairs would be a highly valued commodity. One might expect to see academic theorists working overtime to devise practical solutions to various real-world problems and playing prominent roles in public debates about foreign policy. Yet this does not seem to be the case for most of them. Former policy makers complain that academic scholarship is “either irrelevant or inaccessible. . . locked within the circle of esoteric scholarly discussion,” and one academic recently charged that “scholars are focusing more on themselves, less on the real world. . . Inquiry is becoming obscurantist and in-grown.”

This situation is not what I anticipated when I decided to pursue a PhD in political science in the spring of 1976, while studying at Stanford University’s overseas program in Berlin, Germany. My undergraduate major was International Relations, and I was torn between graduate study in political science or the more well-trodden and risk-averse path to law school. A lecture on Weimar-era intellectuals by historian Gordon Craig tipped the balance: Craig argued that many German intellectuals had withdrawn from public life during this period—deeming politics too corrupt and sordid for their enlightened participation—and their abdication had helped open the door to Nazism. Young and idealistic (some would say naïve), I decided to get a PhD and try to bring scholarship to bear on important public policy issues.

It has been nearly thirty years since I received my PhD. At that time, I was convinced that systematic scholarly research could uncover and verify timeless truths about international politics and foreign policy, and that once those discoveries had been made, a
grateful policy community would quickly absorb them and adopt the right prescriptions. With the passage of time, I’ve gained both a greater respect for the limits of what social science can accomplish and a greater appreciation for the imperviousness of the policy community to reasoned discourse, especially in the United States. Even if scholars were able to produce more convincing analyses—itself a debatable proposition—overcoming the entrenched interests that shape what policy makers choose to do is not easy.

This theme can be traced through my own work, although it did not shape my scholarly path in any conscious way. My initial work on alliance formation (e.g., *The Origins of Alliances*, 1987) was intended to resolve some theoretical puzzles that lay at the heart of recurring policy debates about the use of force in US foreign policy. I argued that the claim that states were inclined to bandwagon (i.e., ally with strong and/or threatening powers) was often used to justify the use of force, largely to maintain US credibility and prevent allies from defecting toward the Soviet bloc. By contrast, if states were inclined to balance against threats, then US credibility was not as important and fighting costly wars in the periphery was not necessary. US intervention was also justified by the perceived need to prevent left-wing governments from gaining power, based on the belief that such regimes were ideologically disposed to ally with Moscow. My research showed that balancing was much more common than bandwagoning, and my primary policy conclusion was that because the United States enjoyed enormous geopolitical advantages over the Soviet Union, it did not need to intervene in the developing world for credibility reasons and could generally take a much more relaxed view of its security requirements. The book was well-received in the academic world and attracted some modest attention within policy circles, but it is hard to discern any direct effect on US foreign policy.

A subsequent work (*Revolution and War*, 1996) applied balance-of-threat theory to explain why domestic revolutions led to increased security competition and a heightened risk of war. Once again, it began with a policy puzzle: why were US policy makers so alarmed by most domestic revolutions, and why did Washington have such poor relations with revolutionary Russia, China, Cuba, Iran, and several others? I found that revolutions made calculating the balance of power more difficult, unleashed mutual misperceptions that made the use of force seem both necessary and attractive, and usually led to heightened levels of security competition and an increased risk of war. I argued that strategies of “benevolent neglect” were likely to dampen these effects and enable the United States (and others) to contain the effects of revolutionary upheavals at less cost and risk. Whatever the merits of these arguments, evidence of policy impact was slim to non-existent.

In *Taming American Power: The Global Response to US Primacy* (2005), I sought to explain how friends and foes were responding to the unusual position of dominance that the United States enjoyed following the demise of the Soviet Union. Why were even long-time US allies alarmed by US primacy, and what strategies did allies and adversaries employ to deflect US power or to exploit it for their own ends? Although not limited to purely realist concepts, this work nonetheless reflected a basically realist sensibility: even if US foreign policy were motivated by noble aims, other states could not take US benevolence for granted. To reduce opposition to US primacy and ensure
that key US allies bore their fair share of collective security burdens, I argued for a grand strategy of “offshore balancing” that would reduce the global military footprint of the United States and avoid long and costly wars in areas of marginal strategic importance. The case for this prescription is even stronger in the wake of the 2007 financial crisis and the failed campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, but it is these events that are pushing the United States toward a smarter grand strategy and not my earlier eloquence.

Finally, my work with John Mearsheimer on the impact of the Israel lobby was both a departure from purely realist analysis and one that nonetheless reflects our shared realist roots. In our view, the “special relationship” between the United States and Israel is not in either state’s long-term strategic interest and is thus inconsistent with basic realist principles. For realists, therefore, the lavish and unconditional support that the United States provides to Israel is an anomaly that needs to be explained. We argued that it is accounted for primarily by the influence of particularly powerful set of interest groups in the United States. The book was a best seller and helped open up a long-overdue debate on this issue, but both the lobby’s influence and the special relationship itself appear largely unaffected thus far.

What have these and other experiences taught me about the relationship between theory and policy? The first (and somewhat depressing) lesson is that academic theory—including my own work—has had relatively little direct or indirect impact on actual state behavior. Scholars may tell themselves they are “speaking truth to power,” but most of the time the powerful don’t listen. To note an obvious example with which I was personally associated, the effort by two prominent groups of security scholars to oppose the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 had no discernible impact on the Bush administration’s march toward war, or on the many Democrats who eagerly supported Bush’s action.

Why is academic writing on foreign affairs of such limited relevance? To answer that question, let us first consider what theory might be able to contribute, and then consider why its impact is relatively modest.

**II. THE ROLE OF THEORY IN THE POLICY PROCESS.**

We live in a world of dizzying complexity. Each day, policy makers must try to figure out which events most merit attention and which items can be deferred, and they must select longer-term objectives and choose policy instruments they believe will advance them. To do this, they depend on purely factual knowledge (e.g., What is the current balance of payments? How much enriched uranium does Iran have?) but also on simple typologies (e.g., “revisionist” versus “status quo” powers), on “rules of thumb” derived from experience, or on well-established empirical laws (e.g., “Democracies don’t fight each other”). And whether they are aware of it or not, policy makers invariably use explicit or implicit theories that purport to identify causal relations between two or more variables of interest.
Because contemporary IR theories are relatively weak and definitive empirical tests are elusive, policy debates often hinge on competing theoretical claims. In the 1990s, for example, disagreements over how to respond to the Balkan wars rested in part on competing theories about the causes of ethnic strife.12 Today, competing prescriptions over how to deal with China’s rise rest in part on rival theories of world politics, with realists favoring preventive actions designed to contain Chinese ambitions, liberals advocating policies of engagement designed to foster ties of interdependence, and social constructivists seeking to “socialize” China within existing norms and institutions.13

These debates are important because relying on bogus theories can get states into deep trouble. Prior to World War I, German admiral Alfred von Tirpitz’s “risk theory” argued that naval expansion would put the Royal Navy at risk and deter Great Britain from opposing German ambitions. Instead, this policy led the British to align more closely with Germany’s enemies. The infamous “domino theory” helped justify America’s costly involvement in Indochina and its ill-advised interventions in Central America, just as the neo-conservatives’ naïve beliefs about the ease with which democracy could be spread via military force paved the way toward disaster in Iraq.

The converse is also true, of course: good theories often produce beneficial policy results. The Ricardian theory of free trade helped increase global economic growth, and the theory of nuclear deterrence developed in the 1950s informed many aspects of US defense policy and almost certainly reduced the danger of nuclear war.

From a policy maker’s point of view, what is a good theory? A good theory should be logically consistent and empirically valid (i.e., it should fit the available evidence), it should also help policy makers comprehend phenomena that would otherwise be incomprehensible. (This is what we mean by a theory’s “explanatory power.”)14 Theories are more useful to policy makers when they deal with important phenomena, and when they contain variables over which policy makers have some leverage.15 Finally, theories are most useful when they are stated clearly. Ceteris paribus, a theory that is hard to understand takes more time for potential users to grasp and is usually harder to verify and test.

How does theory help policy makers do their jobs more effectively? First, theory can help them diagnose new situations as they arise. When seeking to address either a recurring issue or a specific new event, policy makers must figure out exactly what sort of phenomenon they are confronting. Is a stalemated negotiation due to lack of trust or are the protagonists simply too far apart to strike a bargain? Is an adversary seeking to alter the status quo because it is greedy, over-confident, or ideologically inspired, or because it is insecure and trying to enhance a weak position? By expanding the set of possible interpretations, theories provide policy makers with a broader set of diagnoses, and can help them avoid premature closure or dangerous forms of stereotyping.

Second, by identifying the central forces at work in the international system—what Kenneth Waltz called a “picture of a realm”—theory helps policy makers anticipate future developments.16 This capacity is especially valuable when circumstances are changing rapidly and when straight-line projections from the past are unreliable. To take an obvious example, it would be foolish to try to forecast China’s future conduct by looking solely at its past actions, or even its recent behavior, because Chinese leaders are likely to revise their preferences as their relative power increases. A good theory,
however, could tell us how shifts in the balance of power will affect Chinese behavior and help leaders craft policies designed to forestall dangerous future developments.

Third, theory is essential to formulating policy prescriptions because all policy actions depend on at least some crude notion of causality. In other words, policy makers select measures A, B, or C because they believe they will produce the desired result. Theory helps policy makers select objectives, guides the selection of policy instruments, and identifies the conditions that must be met for these instruments to work.\(^{17}\)

Fourth, theory is also critical to effective policy evaluation. In order to determine if a specific policy is working, policy makers must identify benchmarks measuring progress toward the stated goal(s). The selection of these benchmarks should be theoretically informed, based on what we think we know about the causal relationships involved in producing the desired outcome. Grand strategies based on realist theory tend to emphasize benchmarks that measure shifts in relative power, for example, while a strategy derived from liberal principles looks for increases in economic intercourse, levels of democratic participation, or the broadening and deepening of global institutions.

Finally, general theories of international politics can help us guard against various forms of chauvinistic stereotyping. In particular, realist theories highlight the importance of security in a world that lacks a central sovereign authority, and they highlight how structural forces will “shape and shove” even very different states in similar directions. Because they recognize that all states must rely on their own resources to defend themselves, realists are less prone to demonizing adversaries and less likely to see an opponent’s military preparations as evidence of aggressive intentions. Realists are also less surprised when the United States acts in ways that are at odds with its liberal values or its alleged commitment to advancing human rights because the theory depicts international politics as a competitive realm where even powerful states must sometimes compromise ideals in order to improve their security.

**The Limited Impact of Theory**

Although it is impossible to formulate policy without at least a crude theory (i.e., some notion of what causes what), even well specified theories of international relations do not seem to have much impact on policy formation. For starters, most theories of international relations seek to explain broad tendencies across time and space, omitting other variables that may be relevant for the specific case(s) that policy makers are grappling with at a particular point in time. None of our existing stock of theories has enormous explanatory power and the specific actions that states take are usually the product of many different factors (relative power, regime-type, individual leadership traits, etc.). Unfortunately, we lack a clear method for combining these various theories or deciding which one will exert the greatest impact in a particular case.

This problem is compounded by the broader context in which foreign policy is made. Social science works best when problems can be defined precisely and analyzed systematically; i.e., when actors’ preferences are known and fixed, when there is abundant data with which to test conjectures, and when the impact of alternative choices can be estimated precisely. This is rarely the case in the conduct of foreign
policy, however: actors’ preferences are often obscure, they usually have multiple strategies available, and the payoffs from different choices are often unknown. Non-linear relationships and endogeneity effects abound, and preferences and perceptions may change without warning. Even careful efforts to examine the impact of specific policy instruments, such as aid programs, economic sanctions or “foreign-imposed regime changes,” are rife with selection effects that make it difficult to estimate their causal impact.

To make matters worse, policy makers and theorists have very different agendas. Academic theorists pursue general explanations of recurring behavior, but policy makers are more interested in solving the specific problem(s) they face today. Although understanding tendencies can help policy makers understand whether their objectives will be easy or difficult, what happens “most of the time” is not as pertinent as knowing what is most likely to happen in the particular case at hand. Moreover, policy makers are often less interested in explaining trends than in figuring out how to overcome them. As a result, notes Arthur Stein, “in-depth experiential knowledge dominates general theorizing and statistical generalizations in the formation of policy.”

Last but not least, the impact of academic theory is limited even more by the professionalization of the international relations sub-field and the growing gap between the Ivory Tower and the policy world. Although academics still migrate to policy jobs on occasion, their scholarly credentials do not win them much respect in official circles and may even be seen as a liability. They may also learn that politicians usually value loyalty and bureaucratic effectiveness far more than they prize academic distinction or theoretical novelty.

Moreover, like most political science, contemporary IR scholarship is written to appeal to other members of the profession and not intended for wider consumption, which is one reason why it is increasingly impenetrable and often preoccupied with narrow and trivial topics. Younger scholars understand that theoretical novelty and methodological sophistication are valued much more than in-depth knowledge of a policy area; indeed, there is a clear bias against the latter within contemporary political science. Those without tenure are routinely cautioned not to waste their time writing for policy audiences for fear of being deemed “unscholarly.” Because work that might be useful to policy makers brings few rewards, it is hardly surprising that university-based scholars rarely try to produce it.

Instead, the gap between theory and policy has been filled by the growing array of think tanks, consultants, and other quasi-academic groups that now dominate intellectual life in major world capitals, and especially in Washington, DC. Policy makers no longer need to consult university-based scholars for advice on pressing global problems, as there is no shortage of people inside the Beltway who are happy to weigh in and are being paid to do just that. These organizations can provide useful guidance, but there are obvious downsides to their growing prominence. Most Washington-based think
tanks have an ideological agenda—usually shaped by their financial supporters—and their research output is subject to far less rigorous standards. They also lack the elaborate vetting procedures, including peer review, that universities rely upon to make personnel decisions. Policy makers can get outside advice that addresses immediate concerns but it is neither disinterested nor authoritative.

This is not to say that academic scholars have no impact at all. IR theorists occasionally provide the policy community and the wider world with a vocabulary that shapes discourse and may exert subtle effects on policy formation. Concepts such as “interdependence,” “clash of civilizations,” “bipolarity,” “compellence,” “soft power,” etc., form part of the language of policy debate, influencing decisions in indirect ways. Scholars can also exploit the protections of tenure to tackle especially controversial or taboo subjects, and may succeed in opening up debate on previously neglected subjects.

Yet in the United States at least, IR theorists rarely challenge taboos and rarely have much impact on policy unless they leave academic life and work directly in government themselves. Our collective impotence as a field should not surprise us: the United States is a very powerful country and its foreign policy bureaucracy is large, well-entrenched, and permeated by powerful interest groups and other stakeholders. It also has a system of divided government with many veto points, which makes policy innovation exceedingly difficult. Under these conditions, it would be fatuous to believe that a scholarly book or article—or even a whole series of them—could steer the ship of state in a new direction all by itself.

To have a significant impact on policy requires either direct involvement or sustained political engagement, activities that many academics are neither interested in nor well equipped to pursue. Back in the 1950s, for example, Albert Wohlstetter and his colleagues gave dozens of briefings presenting the results of the RAND Corporation’s famous “basing studies” in an ultimately successful effort to convince the military establishment to adopt their recommendations. Similarly, the neoconservatives’ protracted campaign for war with Iraq—which we now know was built on factual errors, biased analysis, and bogus theories—began in earnest in 1998, but did not bear fruit until five years later. Persistence, not perspicacity, is the real taproot of policy influence.

This situation has to be discomfiting to those of us who are both devoted to the “life of the mind” yet interested in using knowledge to build a better world. We can still hope to advance that goal through our teaching, and as previously noted, some scholars will have a direct impact through their own government service. There will be occasional moments when a scholar provides a new perspective or analytic approach that seizes the imagination of those in power, usually because it addresses the perceived needs of the moment. But for most members of the discipline, the goal of “speaking truth to power” will be an increasingly distant one.
Despite these limitations, academic scholars—including IR theorists—have at least three useful roles to play in the broader public discourse on international affairs. First, those who have thought longest and hardest about the nature of modern world politics can help their fellow citizens make sense out of our “globalized” world. Ordinary people often know a great deal about local affairs, but understanding what is happening overseas generally requires relying on the knowledge of specialists. For this reason alone, university-based academics should be actively encouraged to write for and speak to broader audiences, instead of engaging solely in a dialogue with each other.

Second, an engaged academic community is an essential counterweight to governmental efforts to manipulate public perceptions. Governments have vastly greater access to information than most (all?) citizens do, especially when it comes to foreign and defense policy, and public officials routinely exploit these information asymmetries to advance their own agendas. Because government officials are fallible, society needs alternative voices to challenge their rationales and suggest different solutions. Academic scholars are protected by tenure and not directly dependent on government support for their livelihoods, so they are uniquely positioned to challenge prevailing narratives and conventional wisdoms. For these reasons, a diverse and engaged academic community is integral to healthy democratic politics.

Third, the scholarly community also offers a useful model of constructive debate. Although scholarly disputes are sometimes heated, they rarely descend to the level of *ad hominem* attack and character assassination that increasingly characterizes political discourse today. Indeed, academics who use these tactics in a scholarly article would probably discredit themselves rather than their targets. By bringing the norms of academic discourse into the public sphere, academic scholars could help restore some of the civility that has been lost in contemporary public life.

How might these miracles be accomplished? I have no illusions about creating some sort of philosopher kingdom where academics rule, and thirty years at three different universities and three different think tanks have convinced me that such a world would almost certainly not be an improvement. But should academic scholars of international relations really be proud that so few people care about what we have to say? It will do little good to implore policy makers and the public to pay more attention to us; the only remedy is to produce work that is both academically rigorous, but also potentially useful to those charged with making policy decisions. What is needed, therefore, is a conscious effort to alter the prevailing norms and incentives in the academic community. This goal is not as far-fetched as it might seem, for these professional norms are neither fixed nor divinely ordained. Instead, the members of the discipline itself collectively determine the norms that govern our enterprise. As a largely self-policing community, we get to decide what traits we value most and there is no reason why policy relevance and public engagement could not be given greater weight.

III. WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

If the community of international relations scholars decided it was tired of being ignored, there are a number of practical steps that could encourage greater relevance. To wit:22
1. **Give More Weight to Real-World Impact in Promotion Decisions.**

Instead of focusing almost entirely on peer-reviewed professional journals and monographs, promotion committees could also conduct systematic evaluations of a faculty member’s contributions to broader public discourse. In addition to measuring citation counts, for example, review committees could also track news reports or blog hits referring to a candidate’s work. And instead of relying solely on evaluations from other scholars, these same committees could also solicit evaluations from policy makers working in the relevant domains. Discovering that a junior colleague’s work had exerted a major impact on how policy makers think about an issue is surely relevant to an evaluation of its long-term value.

2. **Encourage Professional Associations to Honor Public Impact.**

At present, the American Political Science Association gives dozens of awards for books, articles, and papers in various fields and subfields. It gives one award “in recognition of notable public service” and another for career achievement “to the art of government.” If we want to encourage scholars to aim for greater impact, creating one or two more awards designed to honor such achievements hardly seems excessive.

3. **Make It Easier for Younger Scholars to Gain Policy Experience.**

To encourage younger scholars to learn how the real world works, academic departments should make it easier for them to work in government or in other policy-relevant areas. For example, more universities could agree to halt the tenure clock if a junior faculty member wanted to spend a year working in government or for a non-governmental organization. This policy would create more scholars who actually knew how government worked and they would be more likely to produce work that would be accessible and relevant to policy makers. Because most students care about the real world and have limited interest in empty scholasticism, this policy would help create better teachers as well.

4. **Engage Policy Makers in the Research Process.**

The ability to set and pursue one’s own research agenda is a key element of academic freedom. That principle should not be compromised, but academics should be more willing to listen to practitioners when deciding what subjects to explore. In addition to deriving new topics from the lacunae of existing scholarship, there is nothing to be lost from occasionally asking non-academics what sorts of knowledge they would like to have. We might be surprised by what good questions they come up with.

5. **Convince University Administrations to Value Real-World Contributions.**

Presidents, provosts, and deans can further these goals as well by rewarding departments whose members make substantial contributions to the public sphere and by withholding resources from those that are trapped in the “cult of irrelevance.” The purpose is not to encourage departments to devolve into platoons of headline-chasing policy analysts eager to hit the talk-show circuit, but rather to foster a more heterogeneous community at all levels of academia.

At present, professional ethics generally revolves around topics such as plagiarism, academic freedom, and abuses of power in the form of sexual harassment or the treatment of human subjects. These are important issues, but we should also encourage students to think long and hard about the debts that scholars owe the society that supports them and the question of whether we have a broader ethical responsibility to use our knowledge and training for the betterment of society. This discussion must also address the ethical pitfalls that can affect scholars who become directly engaged in policy-relevant research, and especially when funding or other sources of compensation are involved.

IV. CONCLUSION

As Keynes famously observed, “even the most practical man of affairs is usually in the thrall of the ideas of some long-dead economist.” It is possible that IR scholars exert a similar long-term impact but I am inclined to doubt it. Policy makers seem less and less interested in what we have to say, partly because they are too busy dealing with today’s problems, but also because we tend to pose questions they are not concerned with and we provide answers they do not think they need. If academics want to play a more active and constructive role in world affairs, in short, the content of our scholarship will have to change.

To encourage this shift, we will have to modify the criteria of merit within the discipline itself and give real-world relevance greater weight. Absent this change, we can expect the outside world to pay even less attention to what we have to say. Not only does this strike me as an abdication of our responsibilities as scholars and citizens but it bodes ill for the future of the discipline itself. For if we are not producing useful knowledge that can help society address common problems, why should students take our courses and why should universities continue to allocate scarce resources to our departments?

NOTES

2 Some of the materials in this lecture were later incorporated in Gordon A. Craig, Germany 1866–1945 (Oxford): Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 479–495.
3 I was fortunate to study with both Alexander George (my undergraduate thesis advisor) and Kenneth Waltz (my dissertation chair). Their intellectual styles were quite different: George worked inductively and was wary of broad generalizations, whereas Waltz worked deductively and prized parsimony. Yet both saw social science theory as a tool to inform more intelligent and successful policies, and neither believed that academia should be an isolated community divorced from real-world concerns.
8 Strictly speaking, this argument lies outside the realist paradigm but is not inconsistent with realist arguments. Realists maintain that the pressure of anarchy encourages states to focus on advancing clear national interests because states will
pay a price if they pursue other aims. But realists also recognize that very powerful states can pursue non-realist goals if they are willing to pay that price, as the United States has done by giving Israel nearly unconditional support.

One sign of the more open discourse was the publication in 2012 of Peter Beinart’s *The Crisis of Zionism* (New York: Times Books, 2012). Beinart’s extended discussion of the Obama administration’s failed peace efforts also demonstrates that the lobby’s impact is undiminished.


Stephen Van Evera refers to such theories as being “prescriptively rich.” See Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). Alexander George advises scholars to “include in their research designs variables over which policymakers have some leverage.” See “Foreword,” in Miroslav Nincic and Joseph Lepgold, eds., *Being Useful: Policy Relevance and International Relations Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000). Theories that contain no manipulable variables can still be useful if they help policy makers understand the broader environment in which they are operating. For example, knowing whether the system is bipolar or multipolar can be valuable, even if one does not have the capacity to alter that condition.


This was the core objective of George’s work on “policy-relevant” theorizing, as well as the bulk of so-called middle-range theory, which tends to produce contingent generalizations about the impact of specific policy instruments like deterrent threats, economic sanctions, coercive diplomacy, etc. See his “Theory for Policy in International Relations,” in Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).


Krasner offers a telling anecdote: “I did this once and it was really stupid. I said ‘I have a Ph.D. and I know about this.’ That’s a completely worthless comment. No one cares about your credentials . . . [being addressed as a professor in policy circles] was a bad thing because people thought you were a snob.” Quoted in Lisa Trei, “Does the Academic Study of International Relations Matter in the Real World of Policy?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews, 2005).

As Adam Przeworski noted a few years ago, “The entire structure of incentives in academia in the United States works against taking big intellectual or political risks. Graduate students and assistant professors learn to package their intellectual ambitions into articles publishable by a few journals and to shy away from anything that might look like a political stance.” Quoted in Gerald Munck and Richard Snyder, “What Has Comparative Politics Accomplished?” *APSA-CP Newsletter* 15, no. 2 (2004).

The RAND basing studies examined the question of how to deploy US bombers to optimize both their survivability in the event of a Soviet attack and their effectiveness in the course of the war. It is worth remembering that Wohlstetter was not a university-based academic at the time (though he later taught at the University of Chicago), but rather an employee of a government-sponsored think tank.

22 A more extensive presentation of these ideas can be found in Stephen M. Walt, “International Affairs and the Public Sphere,” *Social Science Research Council* (2011), available at http://publicsphere.ssrc.org/walt-international-affairs-and-the-public-sphere/

As Bruce Jentleson has written: “Should it really be the case that a book with a major university press and an article or two in a [refereed] journal . . . can almost seal the deal for tenure, but books with even a major commercial house count so much less and articles in journals such as *Foreign Affairs* count little if at all? . . . [T]he argument is not about padding publications counts with op-eds and other such commentaries, but it is to broaden evaluative criteria to better reflect the type and range of writing of intellectual import.” See his “In Pursuit of Praxis: Applying International Relations Theory to Foreign Policymaking,” in Nincic and Lepgold, *Being Useful*. 
YJIA: You first joined the Treasury Department in the late ‘90s, and then returned in 2009 after nine years of practicing law. During this time, how has the Treasury’s role in addressing a wide range of terrorist threats evolved?

Cohen: Enormously. I was in the General Counsel’s office from October 1999 through July 2001. Our principal focus at the time, in the illicit finance realm, was anti-money laundering efforts. I came in the fall of 1999, just after Larry Summers had become Secretary. One of his initiatives was anti-money laundering as a way to protect the US financial system. He had a notion also of working more internationally on anti-money laundering issues. This was an issue the Department had been working on for quite some time, but that he really wanted to elevate in terms of importance.

I worked on anti-money laundering issues, with a little bit of counterterrorism as part of it, but the main focus of our efforts was on dealing with how illegal proceeds become integrated into the financial system. The simplest way to think about the difference between anti-money laundering and counterterrorist financing is that in money laundering, you have illegally derived proceeds that are put into the financial system and then moved, laundered, and cleansed, and come out the other end as clean money. Terrorist financing is just the opposite: you have clean money that is put into the financial system and then comes out the other end for illicit purposes. In the 1999 to 2001 period, we were focused mostly on anti-money laundering issues. In the intervening ten years, a lot changed.

After 9/11, there was a huge increase in counterterrorism efforts generally, and also in
counterterrorist financing. Domestically, the most significant legal development was an executive order that was adopted in September 2001 that is the foundation of our ability to freeze the assets and prevent transactions by people who are determined to be involved in terrorist financing.

For the Treasury Department, another important development was the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2003. There had been, for many years, law enforcement agencies at the Treasury Department. They were all part of the Treasury Department because they had all begun as revenue collecting agencies. The job that I currently hold used to be called the Under Secretary for Enforcement, and that person was responsible for overseeing the activities of these law enforcement agencies. But over the years, it became increasingly dissonant with Treasury’s dominant focus to have these law enforcement agencies there.

In 2003, when Homeland Security was created, those agencies were taken out of the Treasury Department. The Under Secretary for Enforcement position was eliminated and all that remained was an office that continued to have responsibility for the domestic regulatory agency that does anti-money laundering work, called the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN), and another agency, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which is the agency that administers the sanctions programs.

In 2004, Congress passed a law that created the job I have now, the Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence (TFI). OFAC and FinCEN are still part of it and there were two new pieces: a policy operation called the Office of Terrorism Financing and Financial Crimes (TFFC), which is led by an Assistant Secretary, and an intelligence agency called the Office of Intelligence and Analysis (OIA), which is also led by an Assistant Secretary. OIA, which focuses specifically on financial intelligence, is the only intelligence agency in any finance ministry in the world.

By the time I returned to Treasury in 2009, there were about 750 employees in TFI. So it was a relatively large operation with not just the two regulatory pieces, FinCEN and OFAC, but also the intelligence agency and the policy shop. It was a complete reorientation of what the Treasury Department was focused on. We are still focused on anti-money laundering—it’s still very important. But we now also spend an enormous amount of time focused on counterterrorist financing and have the infrastructure and the legal tools to go after terrorist financing in a way that we did not have when I was there from 1999 until 2001.

**YJIA:** Can you discuss the Treasury’s efforts and successes in targeting donors and fundraisers for terrorist groups? Considering that terrorist plots are often relatively inexpensive, what is the role of financial interference in disrupting terrorism?

**Cohen:** It is true that individual plots typically don’t cost very much. For example, in the case of the failed printer cartridge plot in 2010, it cost maybe $5,000 to pull that off.
The 9/11 Commission also did an analysis of how much it cost to conduct the attacks in New York and Washington. But the real expense for terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda affiliates is not simply how much it costs to conduct a particular attack, but how much it costs to maintain the infrastructure that they need so that they can develop the plots, pay and train the operators, get the materials they need, pay the families of terrorists who were killed in plots, and to maintain security. So if you look at these terrorist organizations as what they are—as organizations—not just at the specific attack, you will see that it actually costs much more money than you would think.

We’ve had a fair amount of success, particularly with what had been the Gulf-based model for the financing of al-Qaeda, in going after the financial facilitation networks that they need in order to maintain their organizations. That, along with many other efforts to weaken al-Qaeda, has had a real impact on their ability to sustain themselves. But the capacity of terrorist organizations to find new revenue sources is constantly morphing and we need to react and, to some extent, predict and stay ahead of where the new funding sources will come from.

**YJIA:** The disruption of terrorism financing and the efficacy of sanctions both depend on the cooperation of the international community. How does the United States encourage foreign countries and corporations to cooperate on such measures, particularly given that enforcement and monitoring are costly?

**Cohen:** A lot of the success that we’ve had in tamping down this Gulf-based donor model has been in working with partners, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and to some extent Qatar and Kuwait—encouraging those jurisdictions to take seriously the threat of terrorism and its connection to the financing that is the lifeblood of terrorist organizations. We have had success in part by acting through our own unilateral authority, but I think even more so by partnering with three different groups of entities.

One is with the UN through Security Council Resolution 1267. Whenever we designate someone [as a terrorist] under our counterterrorism authorities, we also try to get that person designated [as a terrorist] at the UN under UNSCR 1267. The reason is that our designations forbid US persons from dealing with anyone designated and by freezing assets in the US, but if the UN designates someone, it becomes an obligation on every member state to freeze the assets of that individual, as well as to deny travel to the individual. This is a quite powerful sanction. Yet there is still a wide gulf between the people we designate and who the UN has designated.

The second group of entities we work with is the private sector and financial institutions around the world, explaining the risk to their own reputations and commercial interests of doing business with designated terrorists. So although it is an obligation of countries around the world to prevent transactions of UN-listed individuals, many financial institutions also screen transactions against the OFAC list, which is our list of designated individuals, purely as a matter of commercial self-interest.

The third piece is working with governments on what is very much a shared desire and mutual imperative to combat terrorism. And so countries in the Gulf, European
countries, countries in Southeast Asia—wherever there is a terrorist financing issue—we try to share information when we can about the threats and about facilitators and fundraisers. We work with them to improve their capacity to disrupt financing networks and also do the hard work of diplomacy to encourage countries to develop the will to do so.

Returning to the question of whether it is costly or not, I think the same or a very similar analysis is undertaken by countries—what’s the benefit and what’s the cost if we don’t. Countries where we’ve had less progress analyze that differently than countries where we’ve had more progress. It also differs depending on the terrorist organization involved. With Al-Qaeda, there is almost universal agreement that everything should be done to try and undermine Al-Qaeda’s financing networks. For organizations that we regard as terrorist and others don’t—Hezbollah is a great example—we have a much harder time, including with some of our closest allies in Europe.

**YJIA:** US officials have stated that sanctions directed at Al-Qaeda and Libya have been more successful than those aimed at North Korea and Iran. What explains this difference in success? Can you draw on these cases to make any generalizations about the factors that enable sanctions to work?

**Cohen:** That’s a very complicated question. Sanctions come in many different varieties. There are the traditional country-based sanctions, such as on Cuba—that is very much the old model. What my office is well-known for, and I think deservedly so, is moving to a much more targeted sanctions approach, whether it’s weapons of mass destruction proliferators, terrorist financiers, narcotics traffickers, transnational organized crime groups. We’re using sanctions to try and disrupt their financial network.

So to some extent, the success of sanctions depends a little bit on what sanctions you’re talking about. But I think the key ingredients of an effective sanctions program are, first, targeting the sanctions against a problem that is amenable to sanctions as a tool to address it. Basically, we have a hammer but not every problem is a nail, and we’ve got to make sure that we use sanctions in circumstances where they can have an impact. There are a lot of problems in the world that you can’t effectively address through financial pressure, financial disruption, or other economic disruption. It is enormously important that sanctions are part of a broader policy. I can’t imagine a situation where sanctions alone will achieve the objective we are trying to achieve.

Second, sanctions are much more effective when they are internationalized, whether it’s through the UN Security Council adopting a complementary sanctions program, the EU, or other countries—there are a lot of different varieties that this can come in. But the more that we are able to have counterparts around the world join us in the sanctions effort, the more effective the sanctions will be. This doesn’t mean that what we do needs to be exactly the same as what the UN does, the EU does, or the Arab League does—for instance, if you’re thinking about Syria. But having some broader international effort is very important.

And I think the last piece is having an effective enforcement mechanism, which depends a lot on having good information about who deserves to be sanctioned and enforcing the sanctions that are in place—trying to detect sanctions evasion and being able to address it when it happens.
YJIA: Over the course of thirty years, the Iranian regime seems to have become adept at evading sanctions. How can the United States effectively target entities affiliated with the regime, such as the Revolutionary Guard, with sanctions?

Cohen: It’s a hard target given the use of front companies and efforts to evade. That being said, we — again, with partners in Europe in particular, but also at the UN — have identified the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a very important target. We have sanctioned a number of IRGC affiliates and fronts, most importantly its major construction arm, Khatam al-Anbia, which has had the effect of really impairing the ability of Khatam al-Anbia to do business in Europe and for the IRGC to use Khatam al-Anbia as a way to develop projects, whether it’s oil and gas fields or the Tehran metro. It has had a real impact.

The other important IRGC entity that we have sanctioned and that the EU also recently sanctioned is a port operator called Tidewater, which is the major port operator in Iran. It runs the container terminal at Bandar Abbas through which ninety percent of the container traffic into and out of Iran transits. Tidewater is an IRGC company that we sanctioned in June 2011 and the EU sanctioned in January of this year. One interesting thing about Tidewater is that it had been a privately owned company in Iran for many years. It was profitable, ran a good operation, had facilities at Bandar Abbas, the Imam Khomeini port, and a number of other ports, including some inland rail terminals. The IRGC in late 2009 came in, kicked out the ownership, and took over the business — in part, because it was a lucrative business and also in part so that the IRGC could have control over the container ports in order to both export materials that they’re trying to export in violation of Security Council resolutions and import things that they shouldn’t be importing.

We are continuing to identify how the IRGC is expanding into and distorting the operations of the Iranian economy, displacing the average Iranian businessperson. Our sense is that the more we are able to expose what the IRGC is doing, the more difficult it becomes for the IRGC to use these front companies to operate. It also demonstrates to the Iranian public that we will do what we can to try and diminish the importance of the IRGC in the economic life of Iran.

YJIA: Some experts are concerned that sanctions on Iran’s economy are consolidating the grip of the Revolutionary Guard over the economy by boosting its control over the growing black market while restricting the private sector. Can you discuss the impact of sanctions on the domestic balance of power in Iran and the population?

Cohen: I think our sanctions are designed to undermine the power of the IRGC. The dynamics within Iran are complicated and I don’t think we can pretend to know precisely how any particular action will play out nor do I think we ought to believe that we can completely control how the internal dynamics in Iran are going to develop. There is a lot that is completely outside of our control and a lot of what goes on internally in Iran is not a reflection of, or a reaction to, sanctions. That said, our sense is that the more we are able to expose and isolate the IRGC, the better off the Iranian public is. 

— Interview conducted and edited by Hanna Azemati.
YJIA: How has your experience as an academic influenced your work as a diplomat and vice versa? Can you speak to the unique role of a diplomat-academic and how that role is perceived in each of those communities?

Evans: One practice influences the other. The advantage of academic research experience is that you bring a real commitment to evidence in foreign policy-making, and an appreciation of the value of expertise. The value of policy work is to appreciate the pace of policy compared to academia. The sociology and style of policy-making differs from academia. For example, I might be comfortable reading a 280-page anthropology dissertation that tells me lots of intriguing things about the way that people live in northern Pakistan, but the reality in the policy world is that I would be lucky to get a policy principal to read much more than two pages—and the language would need to be different.

In terms of how the two worlds view each other, there can be a degree of mutual skepticism. On the one hand, occasionally government officials imagine that academics live in a Harry Potter environment where they explore arcane issues in great depth but without much relevance to the world of practice. On the other hand, there is the stereotype held by some academics that diplomats are glib generalists who are ultra-realist in their approach to international relations, but not necessarily thoughtful, reflective, or critical in terms of the policy advice they offer. There’s not always a good meeting of the minds when these two groups speak directly to each other. Academic writing values the intellectual and is not always clear. The policy world values clarity and brevity—neither of which always lend themselves to intellectual credibility.

However, I have found that diplomats — my colleagues in the UK Foreign Office and in...
the US State Department—have been thoughtful, well-read, and generally interested in understanding more about the issues or countries on which they work. I have also found a warm welcome in the different academic environments I have been in, and an interest in dialogue about the policy process and what differs from academic writing on it. In Oxford, the Library of Congress, and Yale, I have met collegiate academics. I personally feel enriched from discussions about everything from micro-research on conflict (thanks to the Order, Conflict and Violence Program) to reflecting on crises past (thanks to the historians in International Security Studies) to reconsidering the purpose and possibility of diplomacy (thanks to provocative discussions with my Yale students).

YJIA: So, are we moving toward a point where more people are able to bridge the divide by having one foot in either world?

Evans: There is value—particularly in diplomacy—in your ability to engage with a wide range of different people with different skills. You might have breakfast with a banker, lunch with a politician, and spend the evening with a group of historians discussing a strategic culture or national political movement. Your ability to engage with and interpret these different viewpoints matters. Skill in interpreting these different perspectives and presenting analysis in digestible form for senior politicians is crucial. These skills can be useful in academia—I would like to see more diplomats in the classroom, helping the next generation of international affairs professionals develop knowledge and skills that would be useful for their careers.

However, I’m not convinced there’s a drive toward having many more people who can interface between academia and diplomacy. In part, neither community is fully convinced of the need for greater engagement. Governments sometimes assume they can recruit or contract expertise, while academics can be territorial about their role in knowledge and teaching. Relatively few academics become diplomats—or diplomats become academics. I do both policy and academic work out of self-interest, not at the behest of my office. But I also believe that knowledge and reflection can improve the quality of diplomacy. I have been lucky to serve under two British Foreign Secretaries—William Hague and David Miliband—who are interested in evidence. I was also extremely lucky to work for the late Richard Holbrooke, whose intellectual confidence meant that he valued expertise and robust analytical debate.

The encouraging trend is towards greater engagement between the foreign policy community and others. If you look at the nature of foreign policy formation in the early 20th century, there tended to be small cabals of (habitually) white men sitting around debating the major international issues of the day. It was really only in the post-Second World War period that you began to have policy planning staffs, which were tasked with going out and talking to people beyond government, like university
professors, soldiers, and think-tankers. This has accelerated in an information age as technology—and the availability of data—means that officials can reach out to experts like never before. Interdependence and the complexity of global issues necessitate more engagement with experts beyond traditional officials. Most diplomats are generalists, not specialists, which means we gain so much more by reaching out.

If I want to learn something about Mali or the Maldives, for example, it makes more sense for me consult with someone who has worked in development there for the past twenty years than to necessarily reach for the nearest official. If I want to understand water security and how it affects Bangladesh–India relations, it makes much more sense for me to talk to a specialist on water-sharing issues—perhaps someone at the World Bank or at an NGO—than somebody in my own office. Not all experts or academics want to engage with diplomats. Some fear being compromised, others are suspicious of governments’ motives. It can be difficult to make sure that people understand and feel comfortable with how their knowledge or expertise is going to be used. Examples of this include the use of expert knowledge to support counter-insurgency or counterterrorism.

**YJIA:** Based on your diplomatic and academic work on India, what do you think are the greatest challenges to India’s rise as an economic and political power?

**Evans:** I think India’s rise as a global power is inevitable. The fundamentals are not in doubt but there are challenges along the way. These challenges will shape the pace of India’s advance and the nature of India’s role in the world. Some are domestic: the need to develop India’s infrastructure and India’s glorious, democratic, and complex civil society, which is a huge strength for democracy, but can also push political compromise when bold steps are required. Take economic reform. The recent debate about foreign investment in Indian supermarkets is one example. The government wanted major investment but there was political opposition from within the Indian body politic. Eventually, the government yielded to these opponents, and reform was paused.

One fascinating question is what kind of international power will India become? There isn’t a consensus on that within India. Some recurring themes have informed Indian foreign policy since independence in 1947: autonomy in the international system, strong respect for sovereignty and non-intervention, and a reluctance to become tied into external alliances that could threaten to trap India into policy pathways that might not be in India’s interest. India’s careful consideration of its own autonomy in the international system—it still has a preference for non-intervention—makes it quite different from superpowers like the United States, or indeed the Soviet Union as it was during the Cold War. India is not an activist international power in that way. It is, however, a major development donor: look at the generous aid it has been giving to Afghanistan, for example, as well as its contributions to development in Africa. This includes certain types of support for democracy—for example, India has shared transparent ballot boxes with other countries holding free, democratic elections. But at the same time, India is generally reluctant to push political reform on other countries through the international system.
YJIA: You mentioned the domestic infrastructure challenges. What about development within India in general? How do you foresee the divide in development between different states and territories?

Evans: Some parts of India continue to see significant growth rates, despite the recent slow-down. Economic performance in Gujarat, for example, is extraordinary. And then you’re seeing parts of India that are not. Uneven development is probably natural, since India is such a huge, diverse, political and geographic entity. But greater divides between Indian states—and indeed within them—may add to the difficulties facing Indian politicians and planners as they try to manage the political consequences.

There’s a leftist academic named Palagummi Sainath who wrote a provocative book called Everybody Loves a Good Drought in 1998. One argument he makes is that rural India is neglected by journalists and commentators in favor of the hip, urban spaces of Mumbai and Delhi and Kolkata—and now also cities like Amritsar and Ernakulam. There are a lot of mid-level towns with large numbers of middle-class Indians with money who are living an urban lifestyle. Sainath’s point was that rural Indians remain important—as voters, and as a potential source of disaffection. This remains true today.

YJIA: How critical is a long-term shift toward civilian leadership for Pakistan’s stability and prosperity? How can the United States promote this rebalancing of domestic power without alienating the military in its support for counterterrorism efforts in the short term?

Evans: In the long term, civilian democratic leadership in Pakistan is hugely important for Pakistan’s progress as a modern state. Pakistan has labored under significant periods of direct military rule, as well as indirect military influence. Past democratic governments have worked in the shadow of the military. The Chief of the Army Staff remains an important figure in Pakistan, and military preferences can constrain the debate—and possibility—of policy change.

At the same time, some of the problems that Pakistan faces have as much to do with civilian politics as the military. These challenges include a youth bulge, a huge fiscal gap due to low tax collection but high government spending, the challenge of electricity generation and supply, and also, of course, militancy. With each of these issues, civilian political leadership is just as important as military rule, and democracy alone is not necessarily going to solve them. As we’ve seen with economic reform, for example, there’s not always the political will to increase taxes or make sure that citizens using services—like electricity or schools—actually contribute towards them.

What role is there for the United States? It’s really tricky. One of the former ambassadors to Pakistan—I think it was Tom Simons in 1997—said that the US is perceived to be behind most things in Pakistan, whether they’re good or bad. That’s part of the legacy of US assistance to Pakistan. It’s tempting to exaggerate the role that the US plays and assume that the US can play a significant role in advancing civilian government in Pakistan. I think the reality is that, like in most societies, external inputs can help but Pakistan’s future really depends on Pakistan’s own leaders. They’re going to make decisions autonomously and in light of their own perception of Pakistan’s
interests and that perception may not necessarily correspond with the desires of US policy makers.

YJIA: Do you see a shift in the way aid to Pakistan is dispensed after Osama Bin Laden’s death—perhaps more aid being directed to the civilian government, as opposed to going through the military?

Evans: You have to differentiate between military assistance and economic assistance to Pakistan. Most of the economic aid to Pakistan is run through civilian governments, or in some cases, contractors. This is a balancing act because there is Congressional demand in Washington for oversight of the money, but that’s quite difficult when you’re handing over large chunks of money to any government, particularly through direct budget support.

In recent years, there has been the problem of [United States Agency for International Development] USAID working through contractors in the US. Although this helped meet some of the requirements of accountability to Congress, how much aid actually reached Pakistan and how much went to the so-called “Beltway bandits”—the consultancy firms around Washington, DC? More aid got through than the critics claimed, but the criticism was valid.

I don’t think there’s been a huge shift in the aid strategy since the death of Osama Bin Laden. But the last eighteen months have seen a significant deterioration in the US-Pakistan relationship. On the US side, there is a sense that Pakistan hasn’t delivered on Afghanistan, that it hasn’t necessarily played straight, and you have voices—particularly in Congress and the media—asking why the US doesn’t isolate or sanction Pakistan. In Islamabad and many other Pakistani cities, you can hear a deep sense of frustration with the United States. There’s a sense that the US hasn’t appreciated Pakistan’s role in fighting domestic terrorism. Tens of thousands of Pakistanis, including civilians, military and police, have died fighting domestic extremism in Pakistan. There is also a perception that some of the problems that Pakistan has been facing in the last ten years have derived from the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, and those consequences are not appreciated either. Unhappiness over certain US counterterrorism policies—not least, the raid into Abbottabad and drone strikes—contribute to those perceptions in Pakistan as well.

The bigger issue in the US is the economic opportunity-cost. Every dollar that goes to Pakistan is a dollar that doesn’t go toward reviving manufacturing in the Northeast or paying for social programs in Chicago. That’s a political choice. Pakistan and Pakistanis don’t always appreciate this political reality in the US—that it is tough to build a case for a large aid program against this backdrop, even before critical media commentary on both sides makes it more difficult yet.

Like classical tragedy, there is probably a little bit of truth in both sides’ frustrations. But for the future of Afghanistan, as well as the future of Pakistan, you need an engaged US in an active relationship with Pakistan. It doesn’t have to be a happy-go-lucky relationship, but it has to be strong enough to support serious discussions that are needed over the challenges that both countries face.
YJIA: Do you feel like the political and military situation in Afghanistan is more complex than other cases in which the United States has intervened internationally? How do you think the US should go forward in this environment?

Evans: I wouldn’t say that it is dramatically more complex than other conflicts. There are two fundamental challenges. The first is how to end up with a settlement in Afghanistan that builds peace, stability, and development for the Afghan people. The second challenge is how to attain a regional and international balance that will support Afghanistan.

In the 1990s, you had not only internal fighting and differences, but also external competition over Afghanistan by Afghanistan's neighbors. Neighbors picked their factions within Afghanistan. These two distinct but overlapping problems don’t seem insurmountable, particularly since none of the neighbors really want to spend the next twenty years fighting a proxy war over Afghanistan. Nor do Afghan players want to spend the next twenty years engaged in sustained fighting without the prospect of victory for either side.

However, a political process is complicated because dialogue and settlements can take a long time. There is debate over how settlements should be structured, and major terrorist events or military developments on the ground can affect what happens politically. For example, what happens when people involved in the peace process get assassinated? The lessons from history, I think, are clear: a) a political process in Afghanistan is possible; b) it does take time; and c) you have to be prepared for unexpected shocks along the way. I think that’s true across a range of different conflict negotiation processes elsewhere, as I found when I worked in Macedonia in the late 1990s, or talked to former rebels in Bangladesh’s border areas with Burma in the mid-2000s.

YJIA: How influential is the discovery of resources and minerals in Afghanistan in shaping other countries' interests in events there? Is this discovery a positive development?

Evans: Well, there is the familiar discussion about the resource curse. I wonder if the one thing worse than Afghanistan being poor is Afghanistan being rich. But people have known about some of Afghanistan’s mineral wealth for a long time. The Russians did survey work there in the 1980s, so this information is not new. What you have now is probably the biggest private sector investment in Afghanistan from the Chinese, which is good for Afghanistan in terms of long-term sustainable economic development. But I do not think that Afghanistan will see a renewed “Great Game.” It’s not going to be like the scramble for Africa. I don’t think knowledge about Afghanistan’s mineral wealth or this investment has fundamentally changed the agenda.

Given Afghanistan’s traditional dependence on trade and remittances, and more recently on aid, developing trade routes flowing through Afghanistan from South Asia to Central Asia might better help build Afghanistan’s economy and give Afghanistan
itself a stronger basis for economic development. Opening these trade routes both needs and could contribute to better infrastructure across Afghanistan, as trade will generate government revenues. Trade and transit agreements with neighbors, including opening up trade from Afghanistan through to India, are important.

**YJIA:** What do you think are the most important determinants of a peaceful transition of military and political power in Afghanistan in 2014? What is the role of the international community in supporting this transition?

**Evans:** The transition is about increasing the Afghan lead in terms of security and so much of this is about NATO giving way to Afghan security forces, both police and military, in different parts of Afghanistan. It draws on having effective Afghan national security force with the capability to take over. But transition is just as much about governance and development: you need to have government infrastructure capable of providing a range of different services, not just security, in any given area.

The role of the international community in supporting this transition is not isolated to 2013 or 2014. It is and will need to be an ongoing role. Part of that role is committing the necessary resources to support the county because Afghanistan is still going to be heavily dependent on external assistance for security and development. It’s also about providing appropriate training for the constituent parts of the Afghan state so that Afghan officials and security forces are prepared to progressively take over responsibilities as a transition takes place.

**YJIA:** Based on your experiences as a diplomat, overall what do you view as the main challenges to policy-making and diplomacy in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India?

**Evans:** I think the main challenge is one of coherence and balance. While we shouldn’t lump all of these countries together, the US needs to have a coherent strategic policy toward the region as a whole, as well as individual country strategies that make sense. Policy-making tends to be led by the events of the day, prioritizing the immediate and the urgent at any given moment. But the longer-term challenge is to have a regional policy that fits into a broader Asia policy and a broader global policy. Knowledge about these countries is also important. A particular challenge in both Pakistan and Afghanistan is that a lot of diplomats come and go with much greater frequency than was the case in the past. Whereas some diplomats might have served for three or four years in Pakistan in the 1980s, they might serve for one or maybe two years now. Moreover, because of the constraints of physical security, the ability to get out and meet people is more limited. For example, I learnt much about Pakistan riding on the back of a motorcycle around towns in the 1990s. It’s still possible, but I’m not sure how safe it would be. Times change.
British diplomatic service is investing once more in this kind of expertise. One current initiative has much deeper in-country immersion for diplomats posted to India—preparation that means diplomats can build experience and relationships that they might otherwise not do in the air-conditioned confines of a major city. This is good news.

Perhaps we go full circle here to the link between academia and policy-making. To be an effective policy maker, you want to have more information than you operationally need to make a decision, and you also want that information in the hands of the people who are actually providing you advice. That means having a capable diplomatic corps, with people who really do understand individual countries, as this ought to be essential to effective policy-making. It doesn’t guarantee success and it doesn’t guarantee that the right advice will be given, but it does ensure that the advice is better informed by knowledge.

In the UK, the British foreign minister, William Hague, calls this “diplomatic excellence.” To be an excellent diplomatic service, to provide high-quality advice, and to help deliver measurable outcomes, you need to base that on knowledge. That’s a very positive agenda. Diplomacy should be about understanding other societies and countries, and then using that understanding to effect, influence, and intervene where intervention can work and is appropriate.

— Interview conducted by Hanna Azemati and April Williamson.
Edited by April Williamson and Charlie Faint.
Abstract—North Korea poses serious international security risks that have increased since it demonstrated a nuclear weapons capacity in 2006. Nations like China and South Korea have clear interests and vulnerabilities vis-à-vis North Korea, as does the United States; these relationships are based on historical and geopolitical factors that will endure. But each nation also has different priorities with respect to North Korea and the threats it poses. This leads to different policy approaches toward Pyongyang that preclude resolving the threats. Until common ground and more coordinated approaches can be agreed upon and implemented among China, the United States, and South Korea, there is little hope that achieving stability and a nuclear weapons-free North Korea will be realized.

Say what you will about North Korea. It’s “backwards,” impoverished, isolated, led by an enigmatic, secretive leader, or even that it is “the land of no smiles” where people live a life on the edge of survival. To varying degrees, these negative descriptions are true. It’s hard to escape the stark reality that a nation of some twenty-three million people with reasonably rich mineral and agricultural resources produces less than one-tenth the economic output measured in GDP than the state of Pennsylvania—roughly the same size but with half the population.² It’s also easy to understand why media attention is paid to North Korea. In an increasingly interconnected world and a 24/7
news cycle, Pyongyang has succeeded in keeping its twenty-three million people completely isolated from outside information, communication and interaction with people. Anachronisms like that make headlines.

North Korea’s country profile would typically relegate it to impotent and powerless failed state status. Instead, North Korea is on a very short list of the most pressing international security challenges. It captures the attention of global behemoths like China, fast-growing regional powers like the Republic of Korea (ROK, commonly know as South Korea), established economic powerhouses like Japan, and of course the United States, the sole-remaining superpower. Why is this? And what can we do to reduce the risks it presents? There are several reasons why the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), as North Korea is officially called, has significance seemingly out of proportion to its size and economic strength. This article will consider three of them—its history, its nuclear capability, and its geopolitics.

North Korea’s existence is a historical accident, but one that places it between two of the world’s dominant political and economic systems. On one border is China, on the other is South Korea and by extension the United States. China’s main security concern with North Korea is keeping it from utter collapse. The United States’ dominant concern is the North’s nuclear program and the potential it has to proliferate. Both are legitimate concerns and both must be resolved. The United States cannot accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state, nor can China tolerate its abrupt demise. Neither country, however, has developed a consistent and effective strategy to successfully address these threats, nor have they sufficiently partnered toward a mutual solution.

Both the United States and China have been thoroughly engaged with North Korea, but the nature of that engagement has been flawed. For China, its default position has been to provide aid and political cover when most of the rest of the world is turning the screws in response to misbehavior. China ultimately provides enough food and other assistance to keep the regime in power and the state intact. But that is all it has done. The United States has also paid plenty of attention to the DPRK. But that attention has almost always been punitive: unilateral or UN-sponsored sanctions as a reaction to provocative actions taken by the North. Neither China’s propping up nor the United States’ beating down is sufficient to achieve the security aims each has with respect to Pyongyang. Both China and the United States must use a blend of carrots and sticks to entice and persuade North Korea to move in the directions required to ensure a stable, economically viable state whose security concerns do not require it to maintain a nuclear stockpile. This means that China must be more willing to support multilateral sanctions when warranted, and the United States must be more inclined to consider dialogue and bilateral initiatives with Pyongyang. Neither path is easy, and both countries face internal political constraints. Nonetheless, it is the only way to potentially silence the North Korean roar.

**Historical Hangovers**

The first reason that North Korea captivates the agendas of the United States and regional nations is history. China, South Korea, Japan and the United States continue to
be involved with Pyongyang because of ties forged more than sixty years ago during the Korean War (1950–1953). That brutal conflict saw more than two million killed and was emblematic of the Cold War “proxy” battles. It pitted North Korea and its Soviet and Chinese communist sponsors against South Korea and its American protector. The aftermath sealed in blood the divided status of North and South Korea leftover from World War II. Over the decades, Soviet and Chinese commitments to North Korea became solidified, if waxing and waning due to broader trends within both of those nations. Likewise, US commitments to the ROK were cemented in written agreements and with the presence of US soldiers.

Today, the divided nation exists with a heavily militarized stance and no final arbitration of the war. There is still only an Armistice Agreement, no final peace treaty. Meanwhile, the United States has firm security commitments, including nuclear extended deterrence, to Japan and South Korea that keep it engaged in the region—not to mention close to 30,000 active-duty US military forces on the ground in South Korea. President Obama’s March 2012 visit to the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) on the margins of an international nuclear security summit hosted by Seoul underscores the historical legacy of US ties to the peninsula. The war ended in 1953; the president was born in 1961. Yet his presence in South Korea without a visible acknowledgement of the continued threat from the North would have been a political and diplomatic faux pas.

Economic ties are equally as strong. South Korea is the United States’ seventh largest trading partner, and the exchange between the two economies is nearly $90 billion annually. The United States and South Korea recently finalized a Free Trade Agreement that culminated years of negotiations, sometimes with tense moments over fairness issues, but ultimately signified that the US-ROK relationship is among the closest and most significant to Washington. China, meanwhile, has for better or worse tied itself to North Korea through the blood it shed during the war and since then through direct support to its military, economy, and leadership. While estimates vary on the total amount of food assistance and material support China provides to Pyongyang, all agree that China is by far the largest sponsor of the state. What was once purely aid has evolved in recent years into more of a commercial trade arrangement, as Beijing tries to transform North Korea into a market economy model. While the relationship with Beijing has changed over the years, and was particularly strained during the Great Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 and again during the post-Soviet decade of the 1990s, China is nonetheless co-dependent with the North as it maintains ties that ensure that its small neighbor state survives. This co-dependency, however, should not be mistaken for equality: China’s actions and behavior vis-à-vis North Korea are not based on sentimental notions of communist allegiance or moralistic grounds, but represent a purely realpolitik approach. Beijing undertakes actions and policies toward the North that further its own interests, pure and simple. China lost many lives during the Korean War in order to keep the United States and the South away from its border. It continues to desire and defend that buffer. However imbalanced the relationship may be, it is not one that China can walk away from for somewhat parallel reasons to the United States relationship with South Korea—a historical legacy that has evolved over the decades but remains a core security priority.
The Bomb

The second reason the United States pays attention to North Korea is, of course, because it has nuclear weapons. In late May 2006, the world was alerted to the fact that North Korea had conducted what appeared to be an underground nuclear test. While the explosion was considered a dud—or more accurately a “fizzle”—by informed observers, it nonetheless conferred on the DPRK the status of a de facto nuclear weapons state.

There are three main reasons this is threatening to international security. The first is the risk of a regional war “going nuclear.” The two Koreas already have a tense standoff that is militarized and subject to accident and miscalculation. The chances that an inadvertent skirmish escalates into a broader war now mean the very real prospect of the use of nuclear weapons. The second is that a nuclear North invites neighboring countries to reconsider their nuclear abstinence. What will continue to keep South Korea and Japan from developing their own arsenal? For now, it is US security and nuclear guarantees, but voices in Seoul and Tokyo sporadically call for more independence in security policy. Nuclear weapons could be seen to achieve that. Finally, the risks from nuclear proliferation and terrorism are now increased. Pyongyang has a track record of illegal activities from counterfeiting to drug smuggling to transfer of missile and even nuclear know-how—almost anything for hard currency. Now, with two nuclear tests under its belt and a small and perhaps growing stockpile of nuclear material, it presents a much greater risk to the world because it has something to sell, and because of whom it may sell to.

North Korea’s admission into the nuclear club can be seen as an unfortunate failure of diplomacy. For decades prior to the test, North Korea had been constrained, persuaded, coerced and sometimes bargained with to confine any nuclear activity to purely civilian purposes—or at least not cross thresholds toward weapons. It was a non-nuclear weapons state party to the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), signing on in 1985. Most recently, it had suspended plutonium reprocessing, the way to get bomb-usable material out of spent nuclear fuel rods, as part of a multi-party Agreed Framework that had lasted eight years. The Framework was negotiated at a time when there were clear and recognized “red lines” around the DPRK’s nuclear activities, and they were nearly crossed. The United States got very close to going to war in 1994 over the North’s moves toward extracting bomb-usable material from its existing nuclear reactor. It would have been a preventive war of nonproliferation akin to the invasion of Iraq nine years later. Instead, a negotiated settlement was arrived at that effectively limited North Korea’s activities and prevented a nuclear weapons capability for as long as the agreement’s terms were being met.

In the wake of 9/11, however, President Bush moved away from the bargain with Pyongyang—never popular with conservatives to begin with—and declared North Korea part of the “Axis of Evil” in his 2002 State of the Union address. It did not take long for Kim Jong Il to respond. Soon after US accusations of a secret uranium enrichment program in late 2002, the DPRK announced it was leaving the NPT. No
other nation had ever done so. Watching the US invasion of Iraq in early 2003 in order to prevent a nuclear weapons program under Saddam Hussein clearly demonstrated to Pyongyang that it could choose between Baghdad’s fate, or avoid it by acquiring the bomb. North Korea had enough spent nuclear fuel sitting at its facilities at Yongbyon to extract several bomb’s worth of plutonium. So it did just that. Barely three years later, Pyongyang joined the nuclear club, reversing decades of halting but nonetheless effective efforts to limit its nuclear status. A second test followed in 2009, only months after the inauguration of President Obama, who had made a point during his campaign of the benefits of reaching out to adversaries like North Korea and Iran. Almost as a pointed response, North Korea’s test made clear it was solidifying its nuclear status, not offering it up for abandonment.

North Korea’s nuclear tests quickly elevated its rank among US national security concerns. What had been an already tense situation simply from a conventional war perspective – either by intent or accident – had quickly become among the most pressing US national security challenges. The three risks described above – regional war, more state proliferation, and nuclear terrorism – were now real, not just theoretical. China also took notice. Now its chief worry, the collapse of North Korea, developed a “loose nukes” dimension, amplifying the threat. How could China or the world manage a collapsed state with unknown amounts and locations of nuclear materials? North Korea became the Northeast Asian version of Pakistan.

Since 2006, and especially after the second test in 2009, the nuclear weapons element of the North Korean dynamic has come to define the security concerns for the United States. It has, in fact, eclipsed every other element of the dynamic.

The Real Estate Factor: Location, Location, Location.

North Korea shares a nearly 870 mile long border with China, and provides a buffer between it and South Korea. This wedge position has put North Korea at the center of the action in the region throughout the Cold War and beyond. It separates China from South Korea, a close ally to the United States and a model of democratic and economic freedoms that poses a moral if not practical challenge to China. It also lies close to Japan, another close ally of the United States – close enough, in fact, that the North notoriously engaged in abductions of Japanese citizens who it imprisoned and reportedly used to help train its intelligence operatives in one of the more bizarre episodes of North Korean behavior.

We have already discussed the central focus on the nuclear program that the United States has maintained since North Korea became a de facto nuclear weapons state. It is critical to also understand the Chinese view of the threat posed by North Korea, and the differences China has with the United States, and by extension South Korea and Japan.

Is China concerned about Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons? The answer is yes, but the concern about the nuclear issue is secondary to China’s main focus on state failure. A coup or leadership struggle that expands into internal conflict, or a popular rebellion that leads to regime change, will inevitably send large numbers of refugees across the border into China. Also, the post-collapse scenario could mean that South Korea fills
the void. As mentioned, China fought hard to keep a buffer between it, South Korea, and the United States. It is loath to give that up today. North Korea’s nuclear weapons status adds to the threat posed by state collapse: the issue of loose nukes or weapons falling into the hands of those who would use them increases the stakes for China in this regard.

So what can we do about it?

Let’s review. Washington’s nightmare is a fully-capable nuclear North, particularly one that sells or transfers capability to others. Beijing’s greatest heartburn is a failed state on its border, particularly one that could leave a vacuum South Korea fills.

Solving “the security challenge” posed by North Korea, then, limits the range of responses that one considers. We need to ask how we can cooperatively solve the security challenges posed by North Korea. What can be done to enhance its stability and growth as a nation so that collapse becomes less likely? What can be done to genuinely make progress in freezing and eventually eliminating its nuclear weapons program? And ultimately, what can be done to bring Pyongyang into the community of nations that walks the talk on democratic institutions, transparency, free markets, and human rights?

The answer lies in moving the United States and Chinese approaches to North Korea toward a blend of both sticks and carrots, avoiding the Chinese default to throw a lifeline to prevent collapse and changing the US reflex to either punish or ignore. Each country needs to adopt some of the other’s approach, and apply this blend consistently. This requires that Beijing and Washington acknowledge the other’s legitimate security priorities and find common ground between them.

Addressing China’s Concern

Resolving China’s main concern vis-à-vis North Korea means helping the North evolve into a more self-reliant, economically stable nation that at the same time doesn’t too quickly or too radically become a challenge to China’s way of doing business. What Beijing doesn’t want is another South Korea right on its border or worse, a unified Korea that becomes a South Korea on steroids. But it also would benefit from a neighbor that doesn’t demand constant care and feeding and that puts Beijing in the awkward spot of defending or ignoring its provocations. How can North Korea be helped through a similar kind of reform as China? The goal should be an economically dynamic country with a growing middle class that is invested in more open markets and more political freedom, while maintaining a government and military authority that, at the end of the day, is still in control.

Recent evidence seems to indicate that China may be working to achieve just this. An article in the online journal 38North.org provides an excellent summary of what appears to be a sincere and well-thought out buildup of economic activity between China and North Korea. The article concludes that the activity indicates “a strategic decision (by China) about strengthening its bilateral relationship with the North and pushing Pyongyang towards market mechanisms.” Caution is warranted, of course.
There is a long track record of joint initiatives between North Korea and other nations that sought economic growth or development that failed to stick. The Kim family dynasty is, after all, extremely allergic to even marginal changes or hints at freedoms for its people. Nonetheless, China’s role as the North’s main benefactor and protector means the chances of such efforts succeeding are greater than those from other nations. And Beijing has the greatest stake in having them succeed.

The United States can assist in this regard. While directly supporting the DPRK’s economic reforms or market experiments is not feasible, US support for China’s policies can improve the chances for success. If American diplomats and policy were to clearly recognize China’s stake in North Korea, and indicate US understanding of and support for its influence there, it could go a long way toward moving Pyongyang toward modest economic reforms. This would at once reduce its dependence on China for a lifeline and build trust and confidence between Beijing and Washington on common goals.

The United States and the Nuclear Fixation

Since 2006, the US fixation vis-à-vis North Korea has been its nuclear weapons. What had been a serious security challenge stemming from the heavily militarized face-off along the DMZ and the risk of inadvertent war transformed into an obsession with a rogue nuclear state that could not be counted on for restraint or playing by the traditional nuclear club rules. United States policy toward North Korea—never really strategic or consistent to begin with—became even more crisis management in nature.

For the past six years, Washington has viewed the North Korean threat almost solely through the nuclear lens. This has neglected the broader array of issues that Pyongyang claims are in play: a peace process that formally resolves the end of the war; somehow resolving their view of a “US hostile policy;” and providing some avenues for moving out from under sanctions. Granted, sometimes Pyongyang lists grievances that are canards, but these core issues are legitimate and Pyongyang’s perceived security threats are what they act upon.

Since 2006—and in fact before that—it has not proven effective to respond to Pyongyang purely on the nuclear weapons issue. This has manifested itself in an action-reaction cycle that has been almost exclusively a provocation-punishment cycle, with occasional forays into deals that break down at the first encounter with dispute. A broader approach must be taken that includes but is not exclusive to the nuclear topic, incorporating a more consistent coordination with China and our allies in the region.

Dr. Siegfried Hecker of Stanford University has laid out what he believes the chief US goals regarding North Korea’s nuclear program should be—at least for the near term. In an article he published soon after the North showed him a fully built and seemingly operational uranium enrichment facility at the Yongbyon nuclear complex in late 2010, Hecker declared that the United States should seek “three no’s” in return for “one yes:” “No more bombs, no better bombs (which means no nuclear testing), and no export, in return for one yes—United States willingness to seriously address Pyongyang’s fundamental security concerns.” This formula makes good sense for the
near term. We need to find a way to freeze the North Korean nuclear capacity first so that we can make progress on broader security issues in the longer term. But US policy makers must not forget that an ultimate goal is a fourth “no” – no nuclear weapons capability for North Korea. Fixating solely on the nuclear issue is misguided and limits successful engagement, but we also must not lose sight that it is a central challenge that must be resolved.

Right now we cannot be sure that any of the “three no’s” is in force. In fact, quite the opposite is true. North Korea recently announced its intent to launch a satellite atop a large rocket, reneging on a deal in which it stated it would not do so. Despite some minor technical differences between a satellite launch and a missile-as-weapon, the knowledge gained from the planned launch applies to weapons know-how. There is also reason to believe that Pyongyang has more uranium enrichment facilities and that they may be running apace; Hecker in fact is increasingly convinced there must be others. Finally, there is little chance that illicit trade or sale of nuclear-relevant material or expertise would be completely detected let alone stopped by international rules and regimes. One need only be reminded of the nearly complete nuclear reactor in Syria destroyed by Israeli jets in 2007 – built with the assistance of the DPRK – to realize that the North is willing to sell its nuclear knowledge and how easily it can get away with it.

A New Kind of Engagement

As complex and multi-faceted as the North Korean challenge is, there is one common element to addressing it: engagement. Woody Allen provides some useful advice to the international security community on this point: if “ninety percent of life is showing up,” then it stands to reason that the lion’s share of making progress with North Korea is consistent presence. This means not only consistent interaction with China and Russia to coordinate on our divergent priorities, but also South Korea and Japan to present a united front to Pyongyang. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it means staying engaged with the DPRK even though we know there will be times – many times – when doing so is difficult at the least and barely tolerable at the worst. But simply being “engaged” is not enough. One could argue that both China and the United States – the key protagonists in the story – have been engaged quite heavily over the years. It is the nature of the engagement that must also change. The United States must broaden its diplomatic toolbox to include a blend of sticks and carrots, to apply pressure and punishment when warranted, but always offer an escape hatch as well. China, conversely, must evolve its response to include a willingness to apply negative pressure in addition to its rescue missions.

Waiting for the North Korean regime to collapse under the stress of United States and United Nations sanctions is not a wise policy.
China’s fundamental motivation is to prevent exactly that outcome. Those calling for tightening the screws to accelerate the process conveniently forget that similar calls were made to pressure China’s Mao Zedong in the 1960s, claiming that his demise was imminent. Mao lasted more than a decade after some had already written his political obituary. North Korea’s current leader, Kim Jong Un, is not yet thirty. If there is one thing all observers can agree on it is that the Kim family regime and its inner circle in Pyongyang has survival as its core motivation. Sanctions alone—no matter how severe—will not end their dynasty.

Those calling simply for engagement suffer the critique of being naïve and Pollyannaish, ignoring the intransigence and duplicity that the North has shown with nuclear tests, missile launches, counterfeiting operations, abductions, and similarly unacceptable behavior. Pyongyang has indeed done all these things. But there is far more promise for eventual change by engaging and negotiating with Pyongyang—and Beijing—than not. In fact, in testimony before Congress last year, Victor Cha, a former George W. Bush administration official with responsibility for North Korea policy, cited analysis he conducted that showed that since 1984 and extending through 2011, “Never once in the entire 27 year period was there a period in which the DPRK (engaged in provocative behavior) in the midst of negotiations involving the U.S.”

His point was clear: although not perfect, the historical record shows that while the governments are interacting and negotiating, it calms the environment and helps prevent crises. During these relative periods of calm is when progress can be made on implementing concrete and comprehensive arrangements. The Agreed Framework, negotiated in 1994 at a time when tensions on the peninsula were high and the United States and North Korea were at the brink of war, is a clear example of how effective and durable negotiated settlements can be. Out of the crucible of brinksmanship the two governments negotiated and brokered a compromise that suspended North Korea’s nuclear weapons work in exchange for a package of aid that included nuclear power technology and assistance. In place through 2003, it effectively halted North Korea’s nuclear reactor operations and its spent fuel reprocessing—key pieces of a nuclear weapons program. Only after the Framework was de facto ended in late 2002, when the Bush Administration made clear it was not interested in continuing with the deal, did Pyongyang ramp up its nuclear bomb program again and, barely three and a half years later, detonate a nuclear bomb.

There is another compelling reason to stay engaged with North Korea even though it is often unpalatable to do so: the leadership transition. Since its birth, North Korea has only really known two leaders. Its founder, Kim Il Sung, ruled from 1948 until his death in 1994, and his son, Kim Jong Il, took over until his death in December 2011. As secretive and isolated as the DPRK was over those sixty-three years, we did at least enjoy a relative stability with respect to leadership and policies. There were provocations and bad surprises to be sure, but even though we knew little about the decision-making process inside the country, we did know who was in charge and what their fundamental motivations were. First and foremost was survival of the regime. Today, we are barely nine months into the third generation of the Kim dynasty with young Kim Jong Un. We had essentially no official interaction with Pyongyang since the beginning of 2009, and only began re-engaging late in 2011, on the eve of Kim
Unless and until the United States makes a commitment to sustained, patient, and long-term engagement with North Korea, we condemn ourselves to the patterns of the past. Jong Il’s death. Not only are we playing catch-up with several years of lost time in dialogue, but we are faced with a leadership transition that is completely opaque. There has been no lack of speculation by North Korea watchers about what official statement signals what, and whether the military is calling the shots or if there is division rather than cohesion among the top leaders. But at the end of the day it is just that, speculation. Unless and until the United States makes a commitment to sustained, patient, and long-term engagement with North Korea, we condemn ourselves to the patterns of the past: the peaks and valleys of hopeful agreements dashed by provocations that result in a cycle of tit-for-tat. The problem is, as Victor Cha also pointed out in his testimony, “... even a hawk must acknowledge that a long-term policy of sanctions and military exercises in the end may lead to war before they lead to a collapse of the regime (particularly if China continues to backstop Kim with food, hard currency, and energy).”

In other words, a diplomatic toolbox full of sticks and few or no carrots, and used only sporadically rather than constantly, runs a greater risk of a war on the peninsula. This outcome is the worst of all worlds, no matter if viewed from Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo or Washington. This is not to say that the United States, China, or our negotiating partners need acquiesce to whatever behavior the North exhibits. Penalties are a legitimate and necessary part of the mix. But episodes of misbehavior cause months or years-long gaps in dialogue. Those gaps allow the North to increase the trouble it can cause, creating a more difficult spiral from which to recover.

Conclusion

North Korea will continue to fight above its weight class with respect to the attention it gets from the United States and China. This is for understandable reasons of historical inertia, current alliances and commitments, and nuclear risks. It will also continue to confound resolution as long as Beijing and Washington fail to meet one another halfway and recognize the distinctions between their respective priorities. While both nations have rhetorically validated the other with respect to Pyongyang, diplomatically and in practice there has been little to provide optimism that they will work together to craft mutually satisfying approaches. But this is exactly what is needed.

Unless both China and the United States establish and pursue an engagement strategy that includes a blend of coercion and enticement, we will be stuck with the status quo: a nuclear hot spot free to operate between an immovable object and an irresistible force. Washington can figure ways to provide support to, or at least not impede, China’s efforts to evolve the North Korean economy into a more sustainable one. For its part, China can be more amenable to joint calls for penalties when warranted, and validate American and other regional states’ concerns over the nuclear issue.
Engagement is also required between Washington and Pyongyang but it must be elevated and pursued much more consistently and strategically. The blend of sticks and carrots is one prerequisite. Another is a broader arena of issues on which to relate. Though politically challenging, the long-range goal of addressing North Korea’s security concerns—the disease that caused the nuclear symptom—means establishing and maintaining a variety of channels of communication and negotiation. These can include continued cooperation on sporadic operations to recover US servicemen’s remains, a more permissive US visa policy that allows for North Koreans to travel here more readily, cooperative projects on matters like education, agriculture, and yes, even nuclear safety and space exploration. US diplomacy has to be patient, creative, and holistic. Pauses when provocations happen must be minimal. With this approach, we not only gather more understanding of Pyongyang, but build more trust and confidence. As these dynamics improve so, too, do the chances for successful agreements and the beginning of transforming the relationship. That transformation is fundamentally what is required before we can achieve an end to the nuclear program.

North Korea is a mouse that keeps the Chinese and American elephants scampering. But we have the tools to build a better mousetrap. It won’t be easy, but failing to do so may lead to a Second Korean War—this time with a nuclear roar.  

— Judith Heistein Sabba served as Lead Editor for this article.

NOTES

2 Comparisons were derived using data from the CIA World Factbook, that puts North Korea’s annual economic output at roughly $40 billion; and data from the website Econpost.com showing recent GDP for Pennsylvania at roughly $440 billion.
3 See Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, The U.S.-South Korea Alliance, Jayshree Bajoria and Youkyung Lee; October 13, 2011
5 http://38north.org/2012/02/hgp021712/; “China’s Embrace of North Korea: The Curious Case of the Hwanggumpyong Island Economic Zone.”
7 Scientist: North Korea likely has more nuclear facilities. By Paula Hancocks, CNN; updated 11:25 PM EDT, Thu March 22, 2012
8 The intelligence community concluded that the facility bombed by Israel in 2007 was in fact a nearly complete nuclear reactor that had been aided and abetted by North Korea. See Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Background Briefing with Senior U.S. Officials on Syria’s Covert Nuclear Reactor and North Korea’s Involvement, April 24, 2008, http://www.dni.gov/interviews/20080424_interview.pdf.
9 Testimony of Dr. Victor D. Cha, Professor of Georgetown University and Senior Adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 10, 2011, Before the United States House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, p. 5.
10 Ibid., p. 5.
Destiny of the Pearl: How Sri Lanka’s Colombo Consensus Trumped Beijing and Washington in the Indian Ocean

By Patrick Mendis

Abstract—As Sri Lanka’s Eelam War between government forces and the separatist Tamil Tigers ended with the defeat of the terrorists, the island nation of Sri Lanka entered into another increasingly treacherous but as-yet subtle conflict: that between the United States and China to secure the flow of Persian Gulf energy resources and free trade in the Indian Ocean passageway. A series of Chinese-built ports and airfields across the Indian Ocean comprises a grand “string of pearls” strategy within which Sri Lanka has become a crown jewel. The new forces of global power are geoeconomic, in which every capital in the world—from Washington, Beijing, London, and New Delhi to Karachi, Tehran, and Tokyo—seeks out Colombo, Sri Lanka’s capital, as part of the twenty-first century’s latest “Great Game.” More recently, in a failure of American foreign policy, Sri Lanka drifted toward Beijing as China’s naval strategy gained momentum; however, the challenge for the emergent Colombo Consensus lies in navigating the freedoms and voices of its people—not flaunting the laurels of its combative, defiant, and dictatorial leaders.

Colombo Consensus: Washington vs. Beijing

The Sri Lankan government’s twenty-five year Eelam War against its separatist Tamil Tigers nemesis ended brutally in May 2009. The war-shattered island nation needed foreign assistance to avoid further humanitarian crises, protect war refugees, support post-conflict reconstruction, and guarantee overall economic development for its highly...
literate and industrious people. Sri Lanka’s economic development policy has often been guided by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), both undergirded by the influence of the US foreign policy apparatus. Over the past three decades, this has included the austerity measures and conditionality of the two Bretton Woods institutions meted out through their painful structural adjustment programs. To finance rebuilding efforts, Sri Lanka returned to Washington and borrowed $2.6 billion from the IMF in July 2009. The conditionality of the policy prescriptions—a “standard” set of macroeconomic reforms known as the Washington Consensus—has primarily been influenced by an American-style trade liberalization and economic growth strategy coupled with the promotion of democratic systems of governance, transparency, and accountability.

Meanwhile, the pro-government Sunday Times of Sri Lanka reported that China’s Export-Import Bank provided more than $6.1 billion loans to Colombo in 2009 for post-war development projects, more than the loans provided by traditional donors India, Japan, and the United States combined. Unlike the Bretton Woods institutions, Beijing has few to no conditions attached to their loans: no structural adjustments, policy reforms, competitive biddings, transparency, or accountability. For current Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa, there have been plenty of reasons to look for alternatives to conditioned Western aid, and the non-conditionality of the Beijing Consensus was the best option.

Since the Rajapaksa administration (with the Chinese military assistance and diplomatic support) had brought about a brutal end to the Eelam War, Colombo has received heavy criticism from the United Nations, the United Kingdom, and the United States for alleged war crimes, human rights violations, widespread corruption, and nepotism. The current US Ambassador in Colombo, Patricia Butenis, recalled former Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga having blamed “Rajapaksa’s abuse of power” for allowing the island’s relations with the Western countries to “[spiral] down reaching a new low in the country’s history.” Kumaratunga had further characterized her one-time protégé and his brothers in the government as “uneducated and uncultured rascals,” the divided country’s corruption as “appallingly bad,” and the political climate as “vindictive and threatening.” As such criticism mounted, the initial assessment of Sri Lanka’s final phase of the Eelam War and associated human rights violations became a top concern for Geneva, London, and Washington.

But with the release of the new US “re-charting” strategy for Sri Lanka outlined in a 2009 US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Report, the White House, Pentagon, and State Department reset the geopolitical priority button in order to allow the United States to use the island to advance its national security interests in the Indian Ocean. As the report concluded, “We cannot afford to lose Sri Lanka” [emphasis added]. Accordingly, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reminded visiting Sri Lankan External Affairs Minister Gamini Lakshman Peiris in May 2010 that, “The United States has long been a friend of Sri Lanka. Our countries share a history of democratic institutions, and we have an active USAID program that has invested more than $1.9 billion in Sri Lanka since 1956.” Yet the current Chinese investment of over $6 billion speaks louder for the Rajapaksa administration, as Beijing does not demand accountability and transparency.
Beijing does not demand accountability and transparency for Chinese funding of development projects—which are directly controlled by President Rajapaksa, his brothers, and other relatives and friends.

In the midst of competition between Washington and Beijing over Colombo, the Sri Lankan Parliament—led by President Rajapaksa’s elder brother and Speaker, Chamal—amended the constitution in September 2010 to remove the presidential term limit and give the executive extraordinary powers and freedoms over legislative, judiciary, and electoral appointments. Democratic partners in Washington and Delhi expressed grave concerns over the power concentration in the dictatorial presidency and the Rajapaksa family. Tisaranee Gunasekara, one of few remaining journalists unafraid of speaking out against the regime, characterized the self-serving strategy by observing, “More freedom for the Rajapaksa[s] [to make appointments in every branch of government] means less freedom for the Sri Lankan people.”

Another Colombo commentator noted that the constitutional amendment had created “an imperial President.” Despite such condemnation, the Speaker proudly reminded the world via his official web page that it is the Rajapaksa family—with nine members in parliament alone—that governs the island of twenty-one million people. Apart from Sri Lankans, the family-led, authoritarian political and economic power structure in Sri Lanka is an especially worrisome development for over sixty million Tamil people in neighboring Tamil Nadu state and the large Hindu population in the rest of India.

Meanwhile, the Indian perception of a Chinese threat in South Asia has grown highly sensitive; however, New Delhi’s influence over Sri Lanka has been limited, stemming from a reluctance to intervene since the 1989 withdrawal of Indian peacekeeping troops from Sri Lanka after a Vietnam-like debacle. For the greater part of the Cold War period, India maintained friendly relations with the former Soviet Union while Sri Lanka aligned more with the United States. These ties in both economic and military affairs were seemingly contradictory: Indian and Sri Lankan political pledges to the Non-Aligned Movement, their roles as protagonists within the UN-endorsed concept of an Indian Ocean Zone of Peace, and nominal membership in the Commonwealth of Nations as former British colonies might have predicted otherwise. But when the British Empire was eclipsed as a dominant world power and the United States gained global supremacy in the post-World War II era, both India and Sri Lanka began to shift allegiances. The signing of the 2008 US-India civil nuclear treaty brought American-Indian relations to new heights even as Sri Lanka developed close ties with China. The complexity of these relationships reached a critical juncture when Sino-American relations as well as Sino-Indian affairs began to warm up for geopolitical reasons and geoeconomic incentives.

At the same time, given India’s historic and tumultuous relations with its neighbors (like Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal), New Delhi is increasingly concerned about Sri Lanka’s new bond with Beijing as China is building the Lotus Tower in Colombo,
an ultra modern telecommunications structure that will be South Asia’s tallest and visible from New Delhi. As a creditor nation to the United States and other countries, China has gained enough economic ascendance to command a new direction in global relations and Indian Ocean affairs. Meanwhile, the United States is burdened with the current state of the national debt as well as the expansive focus of American military involvement in both international maritime security and the global war on terrorism. Geo-strategically important Sri Lanka is not only positioned within the international east-west shipping route in the Indian Ocean, but also at the collision point between the occidental-oriented Washington Consensus and the oriental-emergent Beijing Consensus. How might Sri Lanka capitalize on these circumstances to set the “Pearl of the Indian Ocean” — as Arab traders once called the island — on a new and independent path for the twenty-first century? Would Singapore, a country that plays a brilliant balancing act between the United States and China, be a realistic model?

**Beijing’s Crown Jewel in the String of Pearls**

Over eighty-five percent of China’s energy imports from the Middle East and mineral resources from Africa transit through “string of pearls” ports at Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Gwadar in Pakistan, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Coco Island and Sittwe in Burma, Sihanoukville in Cambodia, Marao in the Maldives, and Seychelles. As part of its New Silk Road network, Beijing seeks to protect this trade route as a strategic economic artery anchored all the way from Persian Gulf and African waters to the South China Sea. Colonel Christopher Pehrson at the US Army War College described this elaborate network as “the manifestation of China’s rising geopolitical influence through efforts to increase access to ports and airfields, develop special diplomatic relationships, and modernize military forces that extend from the South China Sea through the Strait of Malacca, across the Indian Ocean, and on to the Arabian Gulf.”

To meet increasing demand for oil and other raw materials, as well as to secure its maritime trade routes through the Indian Ocean, China has either built or reportedly planned to construct vital facilities in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Burma (Myanmar), Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. The strategy in Thailand has partially been developed in response to a lack of progress on the Kra Canal project (similar to the costly and then controversial Panama Canal project), which would directly link the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea. In addition to the existing projects, China has also been exploring the expansion and establishment of other facilities at eastern and western maritime choke points in the Indian Ocean — the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea as well as the Strait of Malacca — to address growing piracy issues, especially around Somalia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

The construction of the massive seaport at Hambantota, a small fishing village of 21,000 people on the southeastern coast of Sri Lanka, is cause for serious concern in Delhi and Washington. In May 2009, *China National News* reported that Sri Lanka resorted to generous financial, military, and diplomatic support from China after India and the United States declined to assist Sri Lanka in defeating the Tamil Tigers. In exchange, China has now begun to reap the benefits of its strategic investment on the island by using the seaport as a re-fuelling and docking station for the Chinese PLA Navy.
Hambantota is also one of President Rajapaksa’s constituencies and is represented by his twenty-three-year-old son, Namal, in parliament. As such, the Rajapaksa administration is accused of pursuing covert family enrichment under the guise of a national development strategy for Sri Lanka. Besides the port at Hambantota, critics argue that China has financed nearly the entire array of Sri Lanka’s other main infrastructure projects—including an oil-storage facility, a new airport, a coal-fired power plant, and an expressway—and all of these projects are reportedly negotiated and managed by Rajapaksa brothers. In a WikiLeaks cable, then-US Ambassador to Sri Lanka Robert Blake christened the president’s brother, Basil, Minister of Economic Development, with the nickname “Mr. Ten Percent” for demanding a ten percent commission on every project. Citing President Rajapaksa’s chief opinion pollster, Sunimal Fernando, current Ambassador Butenis wrote to Washington that “many voters saw the Rajapaksa family as corrupt (85 percent) and the president himself as corrupt (80 percent).”

Despite the growing infamy of Rajapaksa’s “Brotherly Love,” Beijing continues its investment flow to Sri Lanka as if it were a Chinese island. With cheap commercial credit and imported Chinese labor, Beijing built main roads in war-damaged northern Jaffna and the eastern Trincomalee and Batticaloa regions, and constructed a modern performance arts center in Colombo. China has not only sold diesel railway engines and earth-moving equipment in the name of post-conflict reconstruction, but Chinese companies have also invested in the electronic and garment-making industries for which the government of Sri Lanka established a special free-trade zone exclusively for China.

Given India’s previous military debacle in Sri Lanka, the subcontinent is not eager to take a more assertive role. New Delhi leaders have long restrained themselves from direct involvement in Sri Lankan affairs, especially after Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by a female Tamil Tiger suicide bomber in May 1991. At the same time, Sri Lankan Buddhist and Sinhalese leaders are sensitive to the fact that the island’s neighboring Tamil Nadu state in India has a historic kinship with their ethnic and religious counterparts in northern Sri Lanka. More importantly, however, a complex disposition of global geopolitics (e.g., the Nobel Laureate Dalai Lama and Buddhist followers of his exile Tibetan parliament reside in Dharamsala, just north of New Delhi) has been a major concern for India as well as for China. As China expands its economic and maritime networks in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, India—as the dominant regional power in South Asia—is faced with a glut of complex historical issues and emerging realities such as terrorism and separatism.

Washington’s New Vision for South Asia

Following the victory over the Tamil separatist movement, President Rajapaksa portrayed Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict as part of the global war on terrorism, facilitated by unconditional military, diplomatic, and economic tutelage by China. Rajapaksa cheerfully pointed out that Sri Lanka is “a model for anti-insurgency military campaigns elsewhere.” When the United States criticized the way that the Sri Lankan government
handled the final military phase of the Eelam War, Rajapaksa pushed back, saying: “They are trying to preach to us about civilians. I tell them to go and see what they are doing in Iraq and Afghanistan.” The United States did restrict its military assistance to Colombo due to growing concerns over human rights abuses in the bloody civil war and the US State Department listed the Tamil Tigers — inventors of the suicide bomber — as a terrorist group in 1997. Consequently, the United States also declined to vote for a $2.6 billion IMF loan to the Rajapaksa government in July 2009.

With the support of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, the Barack Obama administration initially followed the foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration by isolating Sri Lanka on the grounds of human rights violations and alleged war crimes committed by both the military and the Tamil Tigers. While recognizing the overriding US geopolitical interests in Sri Lanka, the Obama White House pushed for human rights and war crimes investigations in Sri Lanka as an illustration of Obama’s political campaign promise to hold human rights violators accountable and bring all responsible parties to justice. In March 2012, the UN Human Rights Council — backed by the United States — successfully called for the Rajapaksa administration to make “credible investigations into widespread accusations of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances.”

The UN resolution specifically called on the Colombo government to carry out the recommendations of Sri Lanka’s Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC). Bowing to continued pressure from the United States, the European Union and the UN, the government of Sri Lanka had established the LLRC but with members appointed by President Rajapaksa himself. As the American media publicized Sri Lankan human rights violations alongside graphic images from Afghanistan and Iraq, the Obama administration took a softer view on Sri Lanka. Commenting on Sri Lanka’s civilian casualties and the humanitarian crises of May 2009, President Obama said: “I want to emphasize that these photos [of Sri Lanka] that were requested in this case are not particularly sensational, especially when compared to the painful images that we remember from Abu Ghraib, but they do represent conduct that did not conform with the Army Manual. That’s precisely why they were investigated.”

Follow-up exchanges between Secretary Clinton and her Sri Lankan counterpart suggested movement beyond the human rights issues that had previously captivated the State Department and the White House. After learning about a October 2, 2009 WikiLeaks cable written by Ambassador Butenis in Colombo, President Rajapaksa assumed that the softer tone in Washington was related to the lobbying efforts of Roman Catholic Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith (later Cardinal) of Sri Lanka, who reportedly told the ambassador that “pushing the GSL [Government of Sri Lanka] too hard on the war crimes accountability issue now could destabilize Sri Lankan democracy and would set back the cause of human rights.” (The Buddhist president’s wife is Catholic). According to WikiLeaks, the ambassador further elaborated, “He [the archbishop] reasoned that weakening the Rajapaksa — who despite their public image were relative moderates in the Sri Lankan polity— could backfire. . . . Sri Lanka could suffer revolution from the right or a coup by the military.” The Archbishop’s Office denied the contents of the WikiLeaks cable. Nonetheless, the point seemed to hit home. With the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s Kerry-Lugar report, Washington entered a new phase in its longstanding relations with Colombo: a more nuanced policy agenda to
realize American security interests and democratic values including, but not exclusively so, human rights.

A New Colombo Consensus

As bilateral relations between the United States and India only intensified following the signing of the 2008 nuclear treaty, Sri Lanka’s mighty neighbor to the north faced a delicate balancing act with Colombo. Beijing is effectively circling India with a “string of pearls” in Bangladesh, Burma, the Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—the “crown jewel.” Sri Lanka’s new diamond-like status has in turn given rise to the Colombo Consensus that is strategically designed to benefit Sri Lanka and its ruling family. During his administration, President Rajapaksa visited China five times (three times before even assuming office) and Sri Lanka recently gained significant security and diplomatic progress when both countries signed as many as six major military and trade agreements. Nevertheless, Rajapaksa dismissed the Chinese naval strategy by saying, “Sri Lanka is no pearl on China’s string” and characterized China’s presence in Sri Lanka as “strictly business, and not political.”

Indeed, the business community in Sri Lanka concurs with this narrative as they could hardly compete for government projects without the personal approval by Rajapaksa and his two brothers: Basil, the Minister of Economic Development andGotabhaya, the Secretary of Defense and Urban Development.

Referring to the concentration of political and economic power in Rajapaksa’s extended family, the London-based *Sunday Times* calculates that “with dozens more relatives in prominent positions, the net result is that the Rajapaksas control an estimated 70 percent of the national budget.” After citing the many ill-gained positions afforded to Rajapaksa family and friends, the *Times* reports, “There’s always been corruption, but businessmen in Colombo now complain it’s got to the point where you have to know a Rajapaksa to get something done. That’s unprecedented.” This characterization of the island’s leadership is now synonymous with the Colombo Consensus, and tarnishes Sri Lanka’s international image, jeopardizing democratic freedom and transparency.

Destiny through Freedom

With the idea of a Colombo Consensus intertwined with the Rajapaksa Family Inc., Sri Lanka has departed from its long-cherished trademark of Western-style parliamentary democracy into a family-serving strategy balancing between Beijing and Washington. At the same time, the Rajapaksa administration recognizes that India’s economic liberalization grounded in an individualistic brand of open-market capitalism might be more robust and effective in the long run over China’s state-owned enterprise system of national development. The Singaporean model of Confucian governance under legendary Premier Lee Kuan Yew, however, might provide Sri Lanka a hybrid
form of commanding economic development in the context of limited democratic freedoms. Yet the Rajapaksa family pretends to pursue a unique development strategy within a complex environment of global geopolitical realities, domestic economic needs, and Buddhist nationalistic aspirations. As a consequence, the family-run Colombo regime neither resembles a type of Singaporean meritocratic system of pluralistic governance nor adheres to that employed by their stability-minded patron, Beijing.

Ultimately, the success of the Colombo Consensus will be defined by the degree of freedoms that the Rajapaksa administration allows for its people—not the absolute freedom enjoyed by his family and friends, who govern the country in the name of national interest but in reality for personal aggrandizement. If their professed faith in Buddhism works, the doctrine of karma shall self-correct the journey—both personally and nationally—for a more peaceful, authentic Buddhist island in the Indian Ocean. The source of such karmic inspiration may be generated—with a random act like the origin of the Arab Spring in Tunisia—from either internal or external forces, but the eventual destiny of the crown pearl lies within the presence of human freedom.

—Mark Redmond served as Lead Editor for this article.

NOTES


5 See the WikiLeaks cable reported in “Rajapaksas are Uneducated and Uncultured Rascals”—Chandrika Kumaratunga,” The Sunday Leader, October 16, 2011, http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2011/10/16/wikileaks-%E2%80%93-%E2%80%93%E2%80%93%E2%80%93%E2%80%93%E2%80%93%E2%80%93%E2%80%93%E2%80%93%E2%80%93%E2%80%93%E2%80%93-cbk.

6 Ibid.


8 See The Sunday Leader, October 16, 2011.


PATRICK MENDIS


23 See The Economist, July 8, 2010 above.


33 Ibid.


38 Ibid.


40 Ibid.

China’s Foreign Policy Research Institutes: Influence on Decision-Making and the 5th Generation Communist Party Leadership

By Michael Morrison

Abstract—As the Chinese Communist Party prepares for a major leadership transition, China’s foreign policy think tanks are poised to contribute to the conceptualization and propagation of major foreign policy initiatives. This article examines the degree to which Party and State leaders look to think tanks for analysis, and how think tanks can be used as a window into Chinese decision-making. China’s foreign policy think tanks attempt to exert influence in a variety of ways, and clear examples of previous influence over major foreign policies can be seen during the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao administrations. Future predictions are less precise.

Introduction

As China prepares for a transition to the Fifth Generation of Communist Party leadership in the fall of 2012, foreign analysts continue to seek any window possible into the murky decision-making processes of Chinese political elites. China’s foreign relations have grown increasingly complex in the thirty-plus years since the beginning of Deng Xiaoping’s “opening up” policies, and Fifth Generation leaders will face the greatest foreign policy challenges of any other time in Chinese history. Many foreign analysts look to China’s think tanks as a window into the minds of China’s leaders, a way to predict the policies and issues that those leaders might rely upon to help craft their approach to the outside world.

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Foreign policy in China—like domestic and economic policy—was traditionally formed by centralized rule by fiat. But the decision-making process has become more sophisticated since the Deng Xiaoping era, much like China’s domestic politics, economy, and global worldview have matured in kind. The foreign policy mechanism in place today is increasingly diverse, and appears to be changing to resemble that of Western powers that draw upon a wide range of actors to inform and influence decision makers. Yet the Chinese foreign policy apparatus still differs from the American system primarily in that it remains insular and opaque, making it difficult for outside observers to conduct an informed analysis of the current policy debates and the structure that influences them.

The diversity of voices influencing Chinese foreign policy has grown from official state and Communist Party bodies to include universities, the press, regular internet users, and think tanks. Known in China as policy research institutes, think tanks have flourished in China since the 1990s when President Jiang Zemin encouraged their reach and influence. Foreign policy think tanks in particular caught the attention of international scholars at the time, and a brief period of increased scrutiny regarding the scope and reach of Chinese think tanks followed. Over the past ten years, there has been little continued analysis of the role of think tanks although they have grown more complex and sophisticated. This article will examine the influence that Chinese think tanks have exerted on foreign policy decisions in the past, and attempt to determine what role they will play in the future.

China’s 18th Party Congress will be held in the fall of 2012, and new actors will take over foreign policy decisions. A look at think tanks in China may provide insight into how the next generation of Chinese leadership will make those decisions. Predicting Chinese senior leadership succession is an inexact science, and attempting to assess the influence of various elements of the political structure in China is even more subjective. There are indicators, though, that may provide some insight into how think tanks have influenced foreign policy in the past, and can perhaps be used to form an estimation of future influence.

**Think Tank Functions and Sources of Influence**

Contrary to western practice, Chinese think tanks exist within a government bureaucratic structure, and do not enjoy true independence from government oversight. This affects the quality of research and analysis, as think tank scholars depend on the patronage and attention of senior policy makers for influence. In contrast to the western function of policy or political advocacy, Chinese think tanks are structured based on the Soviet system, and conduct strategic thought and policy planning for individual state ministries or communist party organs. There are smaller think tanks associated with universities, but they still depend on the Chinese government in part for funding and license to operate.

Think tanks interact with senior policy makers primarily through written reports on specific topics and personal consultations with senior leaders. Their chief products are “internal reports” (neibu), which fall into a range of classifications for internal or external
dissemination. Select reports are converted into articles for public consumption in monographs or periodical journals. Neibu reports draw on information from a wide range of sources, including diplomatic cables, informal meetings between diplomats and foreign leaders, and in some cases classified intelligence reporting and discussions with foreign academics and policy makers. Reports make policy recommendations that are forwarded through official channels to decision makers, who may or may not read them. Feedback on written reports to think tank analysts is inconsistent, and it is viewed as a mark of distinction to be informed that a report reached or influenced a certain policy maker. Because of the proliferation of think tanks over the past decade, there is now a flood of papers that reaches the desks of senior leaders, and it is up to individual secretaries to sort through the submissions and determine which reports are sufficiently interesting to a particular leader’s agenda and forward them for reading. The secretary becomes the most important gatekeeper, often determining which voices will be granted an audience.

Think tank scholars contribute to state ministry or party small group policy meetings (xiaozu) where they present formal briefings on a specific policy issue that are sometimes accompanied by a written paper. Occasionally a question and answer session follows a formal presentation, in which a more informal flow of information allows analysts to discuss issues directly with policy makers. In recent years, there has been an increase in policy recommendations coming from high-profile individuals that are not necessarily tied directly to a think tank. Because of the rise of what one academic calls “policy entrepreneurs” – former politicians, business leaders, and academics – the relative influence of think tanks may be on the decline as their voice competes for influence with politically connected individuals with better access to decision makers. Communist Party Central Politburo study sessions have increasingly invited individual contributors to present in recent years to discuss important policy questions.

Think tank scholars also participate in conferences with other academics and publish articles in publicly available journals. It is unlikely that journal articles themselves have much effect on decision makers’ opinions, as they are unlikely to be read by senior leaders. Some journal articles are reported to be unclassified versions of neibu reports, but there is no way to determine which ones have been read by leaders of any consequence. Journal articles are an effective way for outside analysts to monitor the topics that make up the foreign policy debates at any given time, but they are usually not a very good indicator of which conversations policy makers are engaged in. It is difficult to tell which topics are leading the discussion and which are parroting themes and concepts already put forth in other venues such as official conferences or internal government study sessions without direct knowledge of the inner workings of those events.

Sources of Influence

The influence that a think tank is able to bring to bear on policy makers is entirely contingent upon gaining access to those policy makers, and drawing attention to the right issues and concepts. This access can be in person, such as interaction in “small group” (xiaozu) discussion sessions or personal consultations with policy makers,
it can take the form of having a paper make it to the desk of the right decision maker. Think tanks derive their influence from three sources of access: bureaucratic position, personal connections, and issue-specific knowledge or experience.

**Bureaucratic position.** Every think tank has some form of government sponsorship and reports to an organ of either the State Council or the Communist Party, advising senior bureaucrats on policy planning and strategic thinking. A think tank’s position within a bureaucratic organization is the most direct line of influence, and is the one most easily assessed by foreigners. Every state ministry has its own think tank that informs senior policy makers and helps drive the internal policy debate.

Even if a think tank holds particular sway within its own state or party organ, its influence on foreign policy writ large is entirely dependent on that government body’s influence. For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ China Institute of International Studies is considered very influential within that body, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself is considered by some to be irrelevant—important decisions are more likely made in the Communist Party Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group or the Politburo. In other cases, separate think tanks within the same bureaucracy have different levels of influence based on other factors such as personal connections or political patronage. For example, under the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) General Staff Department, the China Institute for International Strategic Studies holds much more influence than the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies and appears to receive higher priority attention from senior military leaders. Despite its widely recognized ties to the PLA’s intelligence department, the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies claims to be an independent non-profit research foundation, which may explain its limited role in influencing senior PLA leadership. This is a misnomer, though, as there are no truly independent think tanks—each one is in some way subordinate to Chinese government control, either through funding, bureaucratic organization, or influence and personal connections of senior research staff.

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It has long been reported that think tanks suffer from “stove-piping,” with analysis occurring in relative isolation and results communicated solely within the institute’s own bureaucratic chain of command. This is a significant constraint on the quality of analysis, but there has been a trend toward greater lateral communication with other scholars, although this still falls short of what most would consider true collaboration. State ministries will invite representatives from various think tanks together for issue-specific study sessions or limited-scope conferences, but the results are then held completely within that orga-
nization’s walls. Joint articles or collaborative research between think tank scholars is still a rarity, although this, too, is changing.\textsuperscript{12}

**Personal connections.** Personal connections between senior researchers and government bureaucrats are more difficult to evaluate than institutional position, but may play a greater role in think tanks’ influence on the policy process if those links are substantial. Personal connections are formed in a number of ways, usually through familial relations, school ties, or government service in the same geographic area. Former President Jiang Zemin maintained longstanding ties to the “Shanghai clique” of Shanghai-based think tanks due to his tenure as Mayor and Party Secretary of that city. Similarly, current Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi’s brother, Yang Jimian, is the director of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, which some attribute to the degree of influence that body has on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.\textsuperscript{13}

Personal influence may be overemphasized by foreign analysts, though, or at least on the decline: while Jiang Zemin was known to reach outside of established channels for foreign policy advice, Hu Jintao has shown a greater preference to work with existing bureaucratic structures, possibly due to lesser comfort with foreign policy in general, a stronger existing policy-making structure, or Hu’s personal leadership style.\textsuperscript{14}

A defining characteristic of US think tanks and their role in advising the government is the “revolving door” system, wherein scholars move back and forth between academic roles and government posts, usually as administrations change. China’s think tanks have begun to appoint retired senior government and Party officials in recent years, partly as a result of age rules that force retirement at senior ranks. Former Vice Premier Zeng Peiyan now serves as chairman of the China Center for International Economic Exchanges—China’s first “super think tank”—PLA Deputy Chief of Staff Xiong Guangkai went to the China Institute for International Strategic Studies after his retirement, and Central Party School Vice President Zheng Bijian headed the China Reform Forum, the Communist Party’s premier policy research institute.\textsuperscript{15} Zheng Bijian had worked with Hu Jintao when he headed the elite Central Party School and maintained a strong relationship with Hu after he became the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. When Zheng left the China Reform Forum in 2007, the institute lost quite a bit of influence with the central government.\textsuperscript{16} This falls short of a revolving door system per se, as there is no real back and forth movement between government and academic positions, but the shared experience of government service and academic leadership roles provides a direct line of communication to government and party organizations.

**Knowledge and expertise.** The relative influence of some think tanks over others cannot always be attributed to position or connections, and depends on the substance of analysis.
that is produced. As a bureau of China’s civilian intelligence service, the Ministry of State Security, the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations historically had a monopoly on information, which lent it a great competitive advantage over other think tanks. At one time, it held the largest library of foreign books in China, had exclusive access to classified intelligence reporting, and was one of the few entities regularly allowed to interact with foreigners. The advent of internet access and a proliferation of think tanks in the 1990s eroded this competitive advantage, as more researchers easily gained access to information without having to travel abroad. Open source information, especially in regards to the United States, is usually vast in scope compared to the small amount of information that is classified, and open access through the internet greatly diminished the value of secret intelligence.

Some think tanks hold deep expertise in a particular area, which lends them a degree of authority over institutions with a more general charter. For example, Fudan University’s Center for American Studies and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ Institute of American Studies are both well regarded as the experts on US-China relations due to a tradition of in-depth study and regular interaction with US scholars and policy makers. More think tank scholars are returning to China from advanced study abroad than in the past, creating a professional cadre of academics who have in-depth experience of foreign issues. Claiming first-hand access to foreign policy makers lends a degree of credibility that, rightly or not, gains influence for the Chinese academic.

**Prior Influence on Major Foreign Policies**

Some highly-connected and influential think tanks have served as advisors for senior Chinese leaders, and have been instrumental in forming some of the most significant foreign policies.

Former President Jiang Zemin was known to rely on an inner circle of academics from his time as Mayor and Party Chief in Shanghai, frequently reaching across traditional bureaucratic boundary lines to do so. Jiang, along with Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, lacked significant foreign policy experience and chose to rely on the advice of specialists. Jiang graduated from Shanghai Jiaotong University and made many academic contacts in Shanghai as he rose through the ranks of the Communist Party. When Jiang moved to Beijing, he brought Fudan University Law School dean, Wang Huning, along as his personal assistant before appointing him director of the Communist Party Central Committee Policy Research Office, responsible for coordinating research and advice, and drafting major policy decisions. Along with Wang Huning, former Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and Central Party School scholar Li Jinru is credited with contributing to Jiang’s seminal “Three Represents” theory in 2002. Three Represents was a major break from the previous conceptualization of the Communist Party as the vanguard of the working class to representing the interests and continued economic, cultural, and political development of China’s population as a whole.

Hu Jintao continued to follow Jiang’s example of leveraging think tanks in advising foreign policy, but was more content to work within the constraints of the system in place. Before ascending to the Politburo, Hu served as the president of the Central
Party School from 1993-2002, when he worked to make it into a leading think tank. Central Party School Vice President Zheng Bijian and Institute of International Strategic Studies director Wang Jisi are credited with developing the “Peaceful Rise” theory that dominated Chinese foreign policy in the mid-2000s. Zheng conceived the Peaceful Rise theory as a guiding principle for China’s strategic emergence onto a complicated global stage, to communicate explicitly to the world that China did not pose a threat to Asia or the international community, but merely was continuing its twenty-five-year trajectory of development and opening up. The policy immediately gained widespread acceptance, and was used by Premier Wen Jiabao in a 2003 speech at Harvard University and by Hu Jintao at the Politburo 10th Study Session. Acceptance of the theory was echoed in academic circles as well, with fifty-one academic journal articles using it in 2003 after Zheng’s Bo’ao Forum speech that debuted the phrase, and over 1,500 in 2004.

These major foreign policy themes originated in high-level think tanks and were subsequently adopted by foreign policy elites and senior leadership. “Three Represents” and “Peaceful Rise” are the strongest cases for think tanks’ influence on foreign policy formulation. Later iterations of the “Peaceful Rise” such as “Peaceful Development” and “Harmonious World” are believed to have been created in consultations between outside advisors and senior leaders, but information on the origins of the concepts is less clear.

5th Generation Leadership, the 18th Party Congress, and Chinese Think Tanks

In the fall, the Chinese Communist Party’s 18th Party Congress will convene and promote a “5th Generation” of Party leadership as current leaders reach mandatory retirement age. It is expected that of the nine current Politburo Standing Committee members, seven will be replaced due to mandatory retirement. Similarly, seven of eight State Council and seven of ten Central Military Commission members will also retire, in addition to hundreds of provincial and ministerial leaders throughout the country. This is a generational transfer of power, which is occurring at a time when China is attempting to manage the most complex set of issues it has ever faced, both domestically and abroad. Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang are expected to assume the role of President and Premier, respectively. Xi, like Hu Jintao before him, served as President of the Central Party School and appears not to have much foreign policy experience. Not much is known of Xi’s personal leadership style, but it is believed that he has close and longstanding ties to the PLA. For his part, Li Keqiang recently gave the keynote address at the Second Global Think Tank Summit organized by the China Center for International Economic Exchanges in November 2011. Li congratulated the think tank community on important work conducted on the global economic crisis and praised the work of think tanks in not only advising governments, but also contributing to human survival and development, and global and regional security.
Although specific examples of Xi or Li’s interactions with think tanks are rare, there are several indicators that hint at the role think tanks might play for 5th Generation Leaders. First, the think tank system as a whole has solidified its role in the foreign policy process, with a well-established tradition of advising senior policy makers since the 1990s. The voice of think tanks may continue to be diluted, though, by the increasing role played by other nonofficial foreign policy actors such as university academics, media foreign policy pundits, the internet “blogosphere” and others.  

Second, Xi Jinping’s background at the Central Party School (CPS) could be a positive indicator of his disposition to leverage the advice of think tanks. The CPS serves a primary function of ideological indoctrination for state Party cadres, as well as those from municipal and provincial governments, but is also an incubator for the Communist Party’s most influential policies and ideas. Reportedly all of the preparation work for the 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th Party Congresses came from the CPS. Xi’s military relationships may fare well for the Academy of Military Sciences and certain think tanks, but may sideline civilian institutes affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of State Security. The “Shanghai clique” that enjoyed so much patronage from Jiang Zemin may regain some of the influence that has been lost over the past decade if Xi relies on connections made during his time in Shanghai and neighboring Zhejiang Province during the 2000s. It is also rumored that Xi Jinping’s siblings either already run or are in the process of establishing think tanks, including a “999” Institute (meant to replicate the Chinese term for longevity). The intended role of these think tanks is currently unknown, and they may only serve as a vehicle to direct business connections and prestige to Xi’s family.

Conclusion

Think tanks have played an increasingly important role in the formulation of Chinese foreign policy, particularly since the mid-1990s when Jiang Zemin showed his reliance on them for important foreign policy advice. They have evolved since the days when they mainly served to echo and endorse the policies of senior leaders into a system capable of more sophisticated, informed analysis and true policy advocacy. Yet think tanks in China still depend on government and party bureaucracy, and do not operate independently the way those in the West do. Their growing role in foreign policy-making is offset by the diversification of foreign policy voices in China, which has diminished the influence of think tanks in some cases and increased the quality of analysis through competition in others.

5th Generation party leaders seem poised to leverage think tanks at least as much as their predecessors in the Jiang and Hu eras. The domestic policy environment supports continued think tank development, and China’s complex external relations demand increasingly adept policy study and formation. Personal leadership styles are difficult to predict, and so little is publicly known about leaders like Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang that a loose estimate is the closest possible prediction. If they do choose to leverage the think tank system to support foreign policy-making, a robust, developed, intellectual infrastructure is available, and it would certainly be in their interests to employ it to its full capacity.
China watchers wanting to monitor the future foreign policy directions of China’s political elite would do well to watch and interact closely with Chinese think tanks. They are not a perfect optic into the decision cycles of senior leaders, as they are only one part of a complex decision-making process, but can provide some examples of budding policy ideas in their formative stages. The challenge for foreign analysts and scholars is to distinguish the policy ideas that will take hold in China’s upper echelons from those that are not leading the discussion. 

- Mark Redmond served as Lead Editor for this article.

NOTES

1 The literal term “think tank” is sometimes used in the Chinese literature (zhiku—智库, or zhinengku—知能库) but it is a loanword from English; “research institute” (yanjiusuo—研究所) is more commonly used.

2 The last comprehensive examination of China’s think tanks was surveyed in the November 2000 RAND publication China’s Think Tanks: Windows on a Changing China, edited by Murray Scot Tanner, which was further expanded upon in the September 2002 China Quarterly (No.171). Both publications featured articles by a compilation of authors on various aspects of think tanks, and considered together probably best represented the state of knowledge outside of China about Chinese think tanks at the time. Occasional articles have been published since then but have not offered such a comprehensive examination.


5 Interview with a former PLA staff officer, October 2011; Interview with a US think tank scholar, November 2011.


7 Saunders, 55–56; Ross, 45; Interview with a U.S. think tank scholar, November 2011.

8 Interview with a U.S. think tank academic, November 2011.


10 http://cfiss.org.cn/.

11 Jakobson, 38; Shambaugh, 13.

12 Interview with a US think tank academic, November 2011.


15 Cheng Li, 7.


18 Cheng Li, 4.

19 Alice Lyman Miller, “The Central Committee Departments under Hu Jintao,” China Leadership Monitor, No. 27 (Winter, 2009).


25 Bondiguel, 6.
28 Interview with a US think tank academic, November 2011; Interview with a former PLA staff officer, October 2011.
30 Jakobson, 25–46.
33 Interview with a former PLA staff officer, October 2011.
Abstract—The long-recognized human right of freedom from hunger remains unrealized because traditional remedies for addressing it continue to prove inadequate. Nonetheless, the goals of ending starvation and malnutrition worldwide can be achieved through a global commitment to the International Food Security Treaty, which will place that right under the protection of enforceable national and international laws, and catalyze the development of systems necessary to effect those goals.

Even though stories of hunger in countries as far apart as North Korea and Somalia continue to appear in the press, many people don’t realize that, worldwide, malnutrition runs up a Third Reich-scale death toll every couple of years and stunts the bodies, lives, and spirits of about nine hundred million others.¹ Foreign aid and sustainable trade and agriculture programs are vital to ending hunger, but they cannot accomplish the task on their own. Such remedies lack the strength to overcome either the lassitude of those who see hunger as inevitable or the aggression of those who employ it as a weapon. To reach the needy, the helping hand requires the long arm of the law.

While malnutrition arises from poverty, floods, and various other causes, people don’t actually starve now unless someone wants them to starve. Yet famines — attributed by Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen to socio-political factors² — prove resistant to even the best trade, aid, and agricultural development programs, with criminals employing hunger as a weapon and their victims suffering in a void of lawlessness.

Yet in the more than sixty years since freedom from hunger became part of the UN’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and was confirmed as the only “fundamental” human right in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social

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Human rights law is neglected by some of the most established figures and agencies seeking a reduction in world hunger.

Social Change and Hard Law

Evils like enslavement and hunger tend to prevail as long as legal protection for the human rights to be free of those evils are ignored. History has shown that virtually every major social change from slavery abolition to the enfranchisement of women to halting child labor in heavy industry has required hard law for its realization.

Nonetheless, the approach taken by the FAO’s Right to Food office was just as bereft of hard law as the Bertini-Glickman prescriptions. Its mission has been the promotion of hundreds of food security policies as far-ranging as nutrition education in schools, agricultural market improvements, elimination of export subsidies, debt relief, various green and pro-democracy practices, support for the World Trade Organization market-oriented trading system, and “protection of all human rights,”—all corralled into nineteen classifications in a lengthy document referred to as “Voluntary Guidelines to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security.”\(^4\) Abjuring any call for formal national obligations, the Guidelines couch suggestions in such language as “States are invited to consider . . .” juxtaposing hunger alleviation with scores of issues that have nothing to do with recognized human rights, even in the spectacularly broad Universal Declaration. The Guidelines’ implicit rejection of binding agreements prolongs hunger eradication by dragging it through such contentious issues as genetically modified foods, lifting tariffs, and freedom of assembly, to name just three of scores of Guidelines suggestions bitterly opposed by various constituencies.

Enforced law is society’s signal that it takes the objectives of the law seriously and understands that criminals, such as those who would use starvation as a weapon, are unlikely to be impressed by invitations to consider changing their ways. The weakness of timid
politesse as a protector of a human rights is well in evidence in the UN’s Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Committee’s report expressing “concern about . . . a man-made famine as a weapon of war,” urging “the state party to address the root causes of the problem of internally displaced persons.” That was the human rights salvo the UN aimed in response to the atrocities in Darfur – more than eleven years ago.

The vicious worsening of the situation in Darfur in the years following that murmured call teaches a lesson that should have been learned long ago. No doubt some slave marketers in the mid-19th century United States were “invited to consider” abandoning their livelihood, but they and their fellow Southerners chose to fight a war that devastated its population instead. More recently, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir might have been invited to consider facing justice at the International Criminal Court, however, he chose instead to cut the few NGO lifelines that were keeping thousands of his malnourished victims alive. Criminals either know when the international community means business, or, as Saddam Hussein discovered when he tried to annex Kuwait, they find out soon enough.

Thus proponents of human rights voluntarism and agriculture experts like Bertini and Glickman who ignore the right to food pass each other like ships in the night, with neither headed in a direction likely to end hunger. One overburdens hunger eradication with a heavy cargo of controversial issues, inadvertently consigning the right of freedom from hunger to a largely scholastic exercise with little on-the-ground influence; the other dismisses it altogether while pressing for a modest upgrade of the existing toolkit that has proven so unequal to the task of ending hunger thus far.

The Rise of Strong Anti-Hunger Law

A growing recognition of the inadequacies of those two approaches — and the continuing toll of at least 22,000 deaths from malnutrition each day — has led many leading figures in hunger eradication, economics, international law, politics, and religion (including Amartya Sen, UN Global Ambassador on Hunger George McGovern, and UN Undersecretary-General Maurice Strong) to conclude that the world cannot muster a serious attack on hunger until it enacts serious international human rights law targeted for that purpose. Such law must achieve crucially broad consensus by focusing on the few core principles of hunger eradication that are at once most essential and most likely to win acceptance.

The legal instrument they support to achieve that goal is the International Food Security Treaty (IFST), which aims to place the human right of freedom from hunger under the protection of enforceable international law. The draft treaty and statements of many of its expert supporters can be readily found at www.treaty.org, but its principles are few and clear enough to bear stating here. It requires signatory nations to:

1) **Guarantee at least minimal nutrition** for people within its borders who can’t get access to it on their own;

2) **Contribute to a world food reserve and resource center** for any nation needing emergency help to meet that guarantee;
3) Establish and enforce law against the use of hunger as a weapon;
4) Support UN food security enforcement actions if it’s proven that any nation is unable or unwilling to enforce that law on its own.

The IFST would prohibit the use of starvation as a weapon and deadly variations on the theme, such as refusals to accept humanitarian aid from countries deemed to be ideological foes and deflections of food supplies to military forces away from the populations for which they were intended. Maneuvers like these contributed to the severe famine in North Korea that began in the mid-1990s and the more recent blocking of NGO food aid from those in need in Somalia, Libya, and Syria. The Treaty would also provide additional moral leverage for nations to pressure treaty-violating states by withholding trade preferences, consular protocols, visas, and foreign aid. Military intervention would be a last resort, as determined and supported by broad international cooperation of the kind that arose in response to the warlord-driven Somalia famine of 1992–93 and to Muammar Qaddafi’s blocking of food and water supplies to the city of Zawiya during the 2011 Libyan uprising.

Finally, through establishment of the World Food Reserve and Resource Center (WFRRC), the IFST would establish a mechanism to head off hunger crises as soon as they erupt or even threaten to erupt. No country facing such a desperate emergency should need to issue scattershot appeals through the media and the internet, pleading for help which comes too late for many, if it comes at all. The World Food Programme could function as the nucleus of the Center and, operating in concert with other related NGOs and UN agencies, create a comprehensive hunger prevention and response system mandated for all Treaty signatories.

Civilization evolves. Just as ancient Rome’s innovation of a trained, well-equipped fire department became critical to the lives of cities, so too the IFST’s World Food Reserve and Resource Center is essential to the well-being of the world.

Evolution of the IFST: Problems and Promise

Since the origin of the Treaty Principles in California in 1993, the IFST Campaign has come to be seen by many as comparable to that of the movements for slavery abolition or for universal enfranchisement of women. It has now reached the point where the Treaty must be brought to the UN by member states, a process which will require grassroots pressure upon political leaders around the world. Once presented for consideration, subsequent work will focus on gathering ratifications, establishing the IFST infrastructure, and pushing for universal adoption and compliance.

Along the way, Treaty advocates can expect to encounter the kinds of obstacles that accompany every major shift in social justice structures. The arguments against it can be expected to include:

1. It’s untried and unrealistic and will never happen.

Such nihilistic claims, leveled reflexively by shortsighted observers at many ultimately successful social justice movements, often prove poor predictors of events. To the extent
they retard progress, that negativity can prove self-fulfilling and should be rejected in
the battle against hunger, now that the means to end it are at hand.

Precursors for every part of the IFST already exist. The UN’s Maurice Strong, a senior
adviser to the World Bank and leader of the international response to the Sudan famine
in the 1980s, has described the Treaty as potentially “the centerpiece of a whole system
by which the capacity of the Earth to feed its people is translated into a real commitment
to do something, because there’s no fundamental need for hunger now, and certainly
none for starvation.” Some members of the US Congress have already judged the
IFST “doable,” partly because of its stovepipe-narrow focus on ending malnutrition
and starvation (a vision rooted in virtually all the world’s religions).

2. States will be resistant to making strong international commitments.

Like businesses, governments recognize that formal commitments are sometimes
essential to achieving mutually desired goals that would otherwise remain beyond
reach. On their own or in response to public pressure, national governments have
made innumerable mutual commitments, whether for economic reasons, as cobbled
together at Bretton Woods, for environmental protection, like the Montreal treaty on
ozone, or for humanitarian and public health reasons, like the World Health Assembly
assault on polio.

3. The IFST’s enforcement provisions could trigger military conflicts.

Law enforcement decreases the likelihood of crimes ranging from double-parking
and reckless driving to bank robbery, rape, and murder. The very existence of the
IFST would exert inhibitory pressure on those who would wield the vicious weapon
of starvation. As UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan told the General Assembly at
the opening of its 1999 session, the moral and logistical readiness to launch international
interventions should cause would-be criminal governments to recognize that they
cannot embark on crimes against humanity “in expectation of sovereign impunity.”

4. The foreign aid component of the IFST invites corruption.

Some volunteer firefighters have committed arson and some non-profits have had
funds embezzled from within, but society is not about to disband fire departments
and private charities on their account. Similarly, the United States and other nations
for which aid has become an important component of foreign policy do not abandon it
because some corruption occurs. Given the potential IFST dividends for global public
health and international stability, better to bring oversight—and law enforcement—to
bear upon WFRRC operations than to permit fear to kill the program before it’s born.

5. It will cost too much.

No one can judge the cost of the IFST prior to an analysis based on the terms being
negotiated by the states parties as the final draft nears completion. Ideally, such a
judgment should consider a number of factors less simple to measure than the cost of
a bushel of grain, including:
· The costs of not utilizing the IFST to end malnutrition. Malnutrition experts point to the toll malnutrition exacts upon the loss of intelligence and productivity in hundreds of millions of children. One Food and Agriculture Organization study estimates this one factor alone at close to a trillion dollars.

· A possible decrease in US foreign aid due to broad international commitments. Due to obligations other nations would accept under the IFST, Americans might find that the Treaty actually reduces US expenditures for similar foreign aid purposes.

· The costs of military interventions that IFST enforcement systems might prevent. By causing those who would seek to use starvation as a weapon to abandon their plans, the IFST could save more money—and lives—in the long run than all the aid programs in the world, and cost a great deal less to boot.

· For the United States, greater national security resulting from an enhanced global image. The United States can only benefit from the lowering of tensions, as forced famines and refugee crises diminish, and from a reputation earned by championing the IFST, rather than lagging or, worse, obstructing it while other countries pulled ahead.

6. The United States would reject any agreement under which it might be held culpable of an international crime.

US support for international humanitarian agreements dates back to the first Geneva Convention in the 19th century. While the United States’ failure to abide by the Convention on Torture during the Bush-Cheney administration demonstrates the difference between ratification and compliance, the IFST presents far less of a problem because of the Treaty’s narrow focus on the elimination of starvation—unknown in the United States for decades—and severe malnutrition, which is guarded against by federal subsidies in the United States for food purchases by those in poverty.

7. Food security enforcement action could lead to American military casualties.

Some Americans may resist the Treaty on account of the still-reverberating televised atrocity perpetrated upon two US troops in the streets of Mogadishu during the 1993 multinational humanitarian intervention in Somalia. Yet when another enemy unleashed still worse horrors upon thousands of US troops in the Bataan Death March in 1942, Americans didn’t throw up their hands and declare that they were done fighting tyranny. Further, under the IFST, commitments of forces would be multilateral to prevent burdens from falling unfairly upon the United States or any other single country. Additionally, as noted by US House of Representatives Hunger Caucus Co-Chair Jim McGovern, US championship of hunger eradication will lend new, positive heft to the country’s global image to reduce the deadly virus of anti-Americanism, which in turn should decrease the likelihood of attacks upon US forces and interests.

Casualties of Delay and Rewards of Dispatch

Hunger has hobbled or extinguished far more than a billion human lives since the 1996 World Food Summit. According to the UN, the number of hungry as of September
2010 increased by nearly one hundred million since the Summit fourteen years earlier. Those officials and academics who have called for a “progressive realization of the right to food” ever since the Summit must recognize that there’s nothing progressive about things getting worse. In deadly crises like house fires and world hunger, indifference to haste makes fatal waste.

That’s why elimination of starvation and malnutrition must take precedence over all of the myriad issues various parties have crammed into the right-to-food portfolio. Issues extraneous to direct hunger eradication simply do not possess the appeal of halting the unnecessary hunger-related deaths of more than eight children each minute.

Furthermore, the IFST’s hunger eradication success could generate a much more propitious environment for a general embrace of the Guidelines. In 1998, Dr. Michael Windfuhr, a principal author of the document that later became the Voluntary Guidelines, observed the necessity for both approaches in a comprehensive attack on hunger. The IFST does not address many admirable ideas listed in the Guidelines, but with all due respect to Voltaire, it’s not enough to observe that the perfect is the enemy of the good, for in spurning the opportunity to join forces with the good, a grand program like the Voluntary Guidelines, viewed by its proponents as perfect, can become the enemy of itself.

US Senator and Intelligence Committee Chair Dianne Feinstein has written that the IFST “could become a major element in stimulating global action to eradicate starvation and in strengthening the international justice system.” Those who hope for a brighter future for the UN may be hard pressed to find any more effective means to enliven the organization than by deploying it to obliterate malnutrition via the IFST.

The IFST is rescuing the vision of ending hunger from the recesses of Biblical dreams and bringing it to the threshold of fulfillment. Now it is necessary for nations—both political leaders and the citizens who often need to illuminate the way forward—to take command of this worst of all public health crises. The international community has united before to conquer public health crises, as it did when launching the battle against polio in 1988. At that time, a third of a century after the Salk and Sabin vaccines had become available, polio was still paralyzing a thousand children every day. Advocates of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative then persuaded the World Health Assembly to put in motion the means to effectively end polio. Once the political will to execute an action plan to combat a great public health crisis was summoned, the polio epidemic was doomed, and the number of new cases declined 99.8 percent within fifteen years. IFST advocates believe that, in time, the Treaty can essentially end world hunger, but accept that a decline of 99.8 percent by 2027 would be an excellent start. Whether that happens depends entirely on whether the international community can get beyond the fatalistic fallacy of mass hunger’s inevitability and pro-actively work to create
hard law to end it once and for all. History can judge whether eliminating starvation
and malnutrition from the planet constitutes a good beginning for the progressive
realization of the right to adequate food, once society is roused to move the arm of the
law lying listlessly at its side.  

— Judith Heistein Sabba served as Lead Editor for this article.

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6 The draft treaty and statements of many of its expert supporters are available at www.treaty.org.

7 Conversation with the author, March 5, 1999.


INTERNATIONAL THEORISTS AND COMMENTATORS nowadays are quite accustomed to, as Charles Tilly put it in a landmark text for political science, “big structures, large processes, huge comparisons.”¹ Yet attention to the inherent complexity of these large phenomena is often lacking in this “big picture” mentality. One might call this a naïveté of large numbers that fronts the vast majority of op-eds, articles, and even books published today for an internationalist audience. Large numbers, meaningful though that they might be, very often hide contrasting trends, small revolutions, and everyday challenges. They provide comfort for the grand assumptions of state diplomats and for the generalizations of international relations, but frequently become the object of discussions rather than the starting point for more nuanced analyses. This is most evident, I would argue, in current discussions of the worldwide demographic boom and the accompanying urbanization that are changing our global landscape at a dramatic pace.

A key issue emerging in international politics for both academics and practitioners is that of population: humanity now numbers seven billion. While demographics have long remained on the sidelines of many international processes, global population came under the spotlight after the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF)—somewhat fictitiously—set October 31, 2011 as the day marking another billion-threshold for humanity.² As a UNPF report put it, the problems and possibilities in a world of seven billion are of paramount importance to a plethora of key questions currently setting the international debate. For instance, overpopulation and high fertility rates have a direct influence on cross-cutting challenges such as those of development, poverty, or human rights. Likewise, growing numbers also impact the manageability of climate change or the response to transnational health crises such as pandemics, while compounding problems with infrastructural flexibility, housing, and fair access to basic welfare services. Furthermore, the surge in global population has also led several commentators to wonder how it will impact the crises already vexing the fragile state of the global economy. The report set all this out in a fairly optimistic light by stressing the extensive possibilities that a world at seven billion brings about. It is necessary, it pointed out, not to approach this development as an insurmountable challenge but,
more importantly, to understand the pervasive impact of population growth across the varied spectrum of factors affecting human security. To do so, however, it is imperative to step beyond the dominant rhetoric. The UNPF report has the potential to do that, but much of the impetus for analysis and policy that links micro-processes to macro-trends needs to come from academia and policy makers that are otherwise often prey to the naïveté of large numbers.

This point is well illustrated by the limits of another fast-emerging concern: urbanization. International political discourse is increasingly concerned with the importance of the city in the 21st century landscape. The commonplace line generally goes: humanity is projected to see two-thirds of the world’s population living in cities by 2050; this, in turn, should make cities a central issue for global governance. Yet that mantra is continuously recycled with little insight. Most media coverage tends to consist of rankings and lists of “global” cities and key urban centers, or of vignettes, almost always drawn from China, India, and sometimes Brazil, depicting a seemingly unstoppable move of inhabitants from the countryside to the city. This fairly superficial attention, while highlighting the issue, keeps us from delving further into what this momentous trend might mean. The media and much of the more popular academic literature have in fact pushed for sensationalism on the “urban age” at the expense of less glamorous but more refined studies such as those concerning the challenges of urban safety that the UN-Habitat has been championing through its Safer Cities program or the water sanitation initiative.

Cities now are, as Thomas Rohlen underscores in relation to Asia, the “locus of giant new problems for public management.” These challenges tell us that it is simply not enough to take the expansion of cities at face value. The intricacies of these big numbers need to be critically unpacked. The urbanization of poverty, for example, represents one of the fundamental challenges of the present day, as gaps in governance and growth of unregulated settlements foster the proliferation of slum dwellers, which now account for almost thirty-two percent of the world’s urban population. Crammed shantytowns and uncontrolled suburban ghettos have burgeoned everywhere around the globe as more and more people suffer from lack of shelter and poor housing conditions, which in turn spark other threats to human wellbeing such as poor sanitation, health pandemics, terrorism, and urban violence. Yet urban poverty and marginalization are not solely a problem of the Global South as is often assumed. Much of the urban studies literature suggests that contemporary metropolises in both developing and developed countries are confronted with the challenge of social polarization, represented by splintering urban structures that separate people by socio-economic status, geographic location, and everyday access to even the most basic facilities of today’s modern cities.

Similarly, poverty and social marginalization are not self-standing problems. On the contrary, addressing them entails engagement with other key contemporary challenges, such as climate change mitigation and prevention, and management of the security infrastructure of our cities. The British riots of 2010, the 2005 Banlieue clashes, or the chronic violence faced by megacities like Los Angeles, Mexico City, or Rio de Janeiro are but some of the examples of this. And this complexity is not merely domestic: new waves of international mobility across states and continents are fuelling urbanization.
from afar, as in the case of rising metropolises like Dubai, where almost ninety percent of the population is foreign born. As a consequence, the sheer complexity of the social composition of urban populations is also increasing.

Therefore, when we open the “black box” of the 21st century city, we are confronted with a plethora of diverse, pervasive, and yet closely intertwined challenges that test not only our general appreciation of urbanization, but also our understanding of the city as a crucible of social and technical dynamics. Like the issue of urbanization, the demands and facets of demographics are manifold, interconnected, and multi-scalar. The population boom rhetoric, in this sense, hides complex micro-processes, such as the issue of aging in fast-growing nations with large developmental problems, or in the case of shrinking economic giants like Japan, Europe, and to a relative extent even China in the next few decades that will have to cope with shifting social and welfare demands.

Similar to the analytical limits in most coverage of urbanization, which focuses primarily on the phenomenon rather than its human consequences, the questions about contemporary demographic issues cannot be satisfactorily answered by “big picture” or state-based analyses alone. Migration and temporary cross-border mobility are shaping the face of metropolises worldwide, with demographers and statisticians at all governmental levels reinventing how to model population statistics, political constituencies, and labor markets.

So as much as we should delve further into the complexity of a humanity that has become predominantly urbanized, the seven billion figure need not become the primary object of the discourse. Rather, as it enters the discussions of policy makers in the months and years ahead, the extent of population growth should be but the beginning of a far more comprehensive conversation.

– Adeel Ishtiaq served as Lead Editor for this op-ed.

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3. The extent and nature of this centrality, however, is insufficiently scrutinized: little international literature is currently available to those trying to understand the impact of urbanization for world politics, and equally limited are the accounts that try to bridge the gap between international and urban studies on this matter. An exception to this is Mark Amen, Noah J. Toly, Patricia L. McCarney and Klaus Segbers (eds.), *Cities and Global Governance*. (London: Ashgate, 2011). I have elsewhere discussed this more at length in Michele Acuto, “Gorillas in Our Midst,” *Alternatives* 35, no.4 (2010): 425-48.
China as Peacekeeper:  
An Updated Perspective on Humanitarian Intervention  
By Bernard Yudkin Geoxavier

Steven Hill and Robert Weiss contributed an op-ed in the Spring/Summer 2011 edition of the Yale Journal of International Affairs on China’s increased participation in peacekeeping operations. They asked whether China’s abstention on UN Security Council Resolution 1973 and subsequent actions marked a “new tolerance for (or even, an embrace of) more aggressive forms of intervention.” Furthermore, Hill and Weiss put forth the concern that a return to “mutual suspicion” between the United States and China could threaten cooperation and support for future peacekeeping missions.

Since then, China’s position toward UN Security Council action and future humanitarian interventions has become clearer. Rather than consistently supporting intervention, China will likely take a conservative and self-interested approach, and will thus address international and regional crises through a pragmatic case-by-case strategy. Yet within this case-by-case strategy, while China’s actions may vary, its rationale does not. The decision to embrace intervention will have more to do with protecting its national interests and economic investments and less to do with a genuine belief in the responsibility to protect against gross violations of human rights. The unfolding Syrian crisis is significant in understanding where China stands on the issue of humanitarian intervention.

China’s February 2012 veto of a UN Security Council draft resolution to condemn the Syrian government, which blocked attempts by the United States and its European partners to back an Arab League effort to get Assad to yield power, has highlighted the extent of Chinese displeasure at how the NATO-led Libyan campaign played out. Looking back upon the use of force, the People’s Daily, China’s largest English-language state-run newspaper, noted that “Libya was a negative case study . . . {here} the situation in Syria is extremely complex. Simplistically supporting one side and suppressing the other might seem a helpful way of turning things around, but in fact it would be sowing fresh seeds of disaster.” At the same time, Chinese academia has

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largely reflected the government’s underlying suspicion as to the ulterior motives of countries that have undertaken such action, and has pointed to the devastating effects once international media move on and Western powers achieve “success.”

Enlightened Self-Interest

For its part, China strives to avoid putting the country in an isolated or unpopular position. Chinese leaders have tended to follow Deng Xiaoping’s motto of keeping a low profile and not taking the lead in world affairs. This adherence to the principle of “non-intervention” stems from a belief that an over-engaged foreign policy would complicate China’s trade relations and economic interests in other countries, as well as raise fears of foreign intervention in its own domestic affairs, particularly in restive areas like Tibet and Xinjiang. Recently, however, expanding global interests have led to increased awareness in Beijing that instability abroad could spell instability at home, and that crises in the developing world might directly threaten China’s resource import and export markets. As such, China’s desire to play the role of a regional and global “responsible power” manifests itself in a desire to lead the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and negotiate a series of free trade agreements in North and Southeast Asia. Yet there is a limit to how far China is willing to bend on the issue of sovereignty and intervention. When China’s political or economic interests are at risk, it will more likely support action. When they are not, China’s approach will vary.

For example, Hill and Weiss note China’s rejection of interventionist measures at the UN in regards to neighbors Myanmar and North Korea. Historically, China has often supported North Korea and shielded it from condemnation and sanctions by the Security Council, and has also promoted deep economic and political relations with Myanmar. Establishing a secure periphery of allies has always been China’s immediate strategic goal; blocking strong, coordinated, international action in nations around China helps ensure that it can dictate the terms in its own neighborhood and, in the case of Myanmar, receive economic benefits in exchange. This bipolar approach to intervention comes about when China has, on one hand, tread very cautiously in embracing interventionist measures, while on the other it has touted its participation and contribution to the same peacekeeping deployments as evidence that it is a responsible world power. In fact, if peacekeeping operations supported by China are mapped over its economic interests, a direct correlation is clear: Sudan, with strategic resources such as oil; Congo and the Ivory Coast, with extensive contracts for rare minerals by state-owned enterprises; and Somalia, with sea lanes and cargo in need of protection from piracy — China has supported intervention in countries only where its investments were in danger. Notably, the converse is also true: where China is absent economically, it more often abstains or refrains from intervening, as was the case in the UN-led intervention in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the NATO-led intervention in Kosovo.

Syria: Implications for Further (In)Action

Displeased that the Western-led humanitarian intervention in Libya resulted in regime change, policy-making circles in Beijing were easily won over by the interventionist
slippery slope argument, which warns against the danger of overstepping the set of actions permitted by authorized humanitarian intervention. China worries that humanitarian intervention could turn into a springboard to usurp a national government’s authority, and is concerned that it could be used against governments it likes. Yet by joining Russia in blocking attempts by other Security Council members to condemn Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and demand an end to violence, China took a stance on a controversial issue, and a risk it did not need to take, to protect a country of negligible geopolitical value to Chinese interests. China’s lack of investments in Syria would by itself rule out support for intervention, but with Russia already standing in the way, China’s veto was superfluous. The global reaction against China’s veto prompted explanatory editorials in leading Chinese periodicals, the dispatching of envoys to the Middle East, and support for Security Council demands that Syria grant humanitarian access to the Red Crescent. What this implies is that while China’s vote against intervention in Syria was intended to convey its displeasure over how the intervention in Libya unfolded, it did not anticipate the fallout. This miscalculation did nothing but heap mounds of bad press on China, which is increasingly concerned about its image abroad.

At home, Chinese scholars asserted their broader view that China “should take international responsibilities actively and selectively,” and that it should strategically give first priority to domestic problems and tactically protect national interests in addressing international obligations. Yet China’s evolving approach to peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention is yoked to a realist understanding of the geopolitical needs of the moment. This is what American policy makers must be most cognizant of moving forward.

At the same time, there is a desire in China to move past its century of “national humiliation” and “keep an ordinary mentality as a great power should do instead of swinging between low self-esteem and confidence.” To do so would require an even and consistent application of humanitarian intervention as well as a consistent evaluation of China’s motives. Peacekeeping operations or actions in Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and the Congo have directly benefited China’s economic and geo-political priorities. In backing such future operations, Beijing should demonstrate that intervention can and may be a useful tool not left to Western powers exclusively and not only used to protect national interests.

As humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping operations threaten to erode its sacred tenet of non-intervention, Chinese policy makers will find it increasingly difficult to balance the need to safeguard its interests with the desire to assure the international community of its commitment to peace and security. An honest assessment of Chinese priorities and interests on a case-by-case basis can open the possibility for increased cooperation with China in the near future.

– Kacie Miura served as Lead Editor for this op-ed.
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5 International Crisis Group, “China’s Thirst for Oil” , June 2008; Ian Taylor, “China’s Oil Diplomacy in Africa”, *International Affairs*, (September 2006 Volume 82, Number 5)


“If You Leave Us Here We Will Die”: How Genocide Was Stopped in East Timor


Reviewed by Jessica N. Trisko

The wide variation in the response of the international community to recent episodes of state violence throughout the Middle East and North Africa has brought renewed attention to the uncertain role of international actors in stopping ongoing violence against civilians. When it does occur, international intervention can take a variety of forms, ranging from mediated negotiations and unarmed observation missions to full-scale military operations. Among the instances of success in stopping state-led killings, such as Libya and Kosovo, there are, unfortunately, many examples of failure, such as Rwanda and Bosnia. The history of Timor-Leste—also known as East Timor—is unique in that it provides examples of both the failure and success of outside actors in influencing the course of violence on the ground. The international community turned a blind eye to the widespread killings in East Timor in the late 1970s, which followed a military intervention by Indonesia. The UN eventually succeeded in ending state-led violence by providing the East Timorese with a framework for achieving national independence, and engaging in what was “by any reasonable standard . . . an unusually quick and effective intervention” in September 1999.

At first glance, there is little reason to think that East Timor can provide answers to contemporary questions regarding if and when international intervention is justified. East Timor is a small and strategically unimportant country. With a territory slightly larger than the state of Connecticut, the country’s population of about one million inhabits the eastern half of an island it shares with Indonesia, which currently boasts a population of about 240 million. Yet the history of East Timor parallels many aspects of the events leading to a potential military intervention in Syria. The December 1975 invasion of East Timor by Indonesia occurred in the context of a Timorese civil war that pitted multiple political factions against one another, and which generated tens of thousands of refugees. The UN reports that over 200,000 refugees have fled Syria as of August 2012. The dominant faction, Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) claimed Portuguese-
BOOK REVIEW: “IF YOU LEAVE US HERE WE WILL DIE”

trained forces of approximately 2,500 troops and 7,000 militia. The size of the Free Syrian Army has yet to be established. Calls for intervention by “international forces, designated from one or more countries in the area” came from locals as well as Portugal, East Timor’s colonial master. The Indonesian intervention succeeded in ending the Timorese civil war but did so largely by refocusing the attention of armed groups against the invading Indonesian troops, which eventually reached 32,000 in number.

Despite ending the civil war, the legacy of the Indonesian intervention was a perpetual debate over the legitimacy of the country’s July 17, 1976 annexation of East Timor. The occupation and political incorporation of East Timor into Indonesian territory left the international community in a quandary: to recognize the de facto integration of East Timor through force, or to take a stand in the face of ongoing violence and the violation of international law. Major players in the region, such as the United States and Australia, chose the former option, in part because of their complicity in the arms build-up that preceded the invasion.

Countries that possess UN veto power, such as the United States, Russia, and China, continue to be pivotal in determining when international intervention occurs. On the other hand, the vast majority of UN members simply chose to ignore the problem by refusing to provide de jure recognition of East Timor’s integration after an April 1976 UN Security Council resolution failed to bring about Indonesia’s withdrawal. The uncertain position taken by many members of the international community created the political space for a group of concerned activists and local Timorese politicians to use human rights violations in the territory as a clarion call for East Timor’s independence.

Following the resignation of the country’s dictatorial and long-standing President Suharto in 1998 in the face of widespread popular protests, Portugal and Indonesia (under the leadership of former Indonesian Vice President Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie) undertook discussions mediated by the UN, which led to the creation of a referendum on East Timor’s future status. Thus the dispute over East Timor’s status began and ended with the help of the UN. In June 1999, the UN Security Council established the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), and authorized 280 civilian police officers and fifty military liaisons to assist Indonesia in maintaining security in the run-up to the referendum. The period between the establishment of UNTAET and the referendum was marred by violence but on May 20, 2002, Timor-Leste finally became an independent state after 300 years of foreign rule.

UCLA Professor Geoffrey Robinson’s innovative history of political violence in East Timor examines both the international community’s complicity in the Indonesian invasion as well as the positive role that the international community later played in helping East Timor achieve independence. His book, “If You Leave Us Here We Will Die”: How Genocide Was Stopped in East Timor, has both a provocative title and content. While the best estimates of the deaths caused by the conflict (both direct, through violence, and indirect, through illness and starvation) number from approximately 103,000 to 150,000 over a period of about twenty-five years, Robinson’s decision to invoke the concept of genocide—defined as acts committed in time of peace or war with the intent to destroy in whole or part a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group—in reference to East Timor is controversial. Little evidence has emerged that
the violence committed by members of the *Tentara Nasional Indonesia*, the Indonesian armed forces, was intended to systematically eliminate the local population. In fact, Robinson himself claims “there is no evidence that the Indonesian army commanders who planned the operations in East Timor intended to kill one-third of the population. Their principal aim was to quell resistance to their rule.” Robinson does, however, provide substantial evidence that East Timor’s Tetum-speaking Catholics were indelibly scarred by the Indonesian occupation.

While the vast majority of political violence in East Timor took place during the initial months of the Indonesian invasion, Robinson makes a strong argument that the resurgence of violence immediately before the 1999 referendum on East Timor’s independence cannot be understood apart from the history of state-society relations in Indonesia. Approximately 2,600 individuals died as a result of the violence in April and September of 1999. While the UN-sponsored referendum may explain the timing of this violence, Robinson contends that “a climate of impunity” among the Indonesian armed forces based on “a well-founded belief among officers and soldiers that they were beyond the reach of the law” created conditions “in which extreme violence was almost inevitable.” Such conditions often prevail in societies dominated by the military or other security sector institutions.

One among many of the reasons why the international community continued to pay attention to human rights abuses in East Timor was because of the efforts of Timorese exiles, members of the Catholic church, and concerned scholars—including Cornell Professor Benedict Anderson—who refused to let the plight of East Timor fall from memory. The fervency of their belief in the ability of the UN to rectify past wrongs is reflected in “If You Leave Us Here We Will Die.” Recounting his June 1999 arrival in East Timor’s capital city, Dili, Robinson writes, “Here, in a place that had been so vigorously closed off from the world community—and whose occupying authorities had so routinely scoffed at UN criticism and international law—the United Nations had finally established a meaningful presence.” My recent trip to Dili confirmed the enduring nature of the UN presence in East Timor in the form of newly created government institutions, embassies, and a plethora of UN vehicles.

Robinson’s work takes an original form, combining historical narrative with first person accounts of his own experiences on the ground as a Political Affairs Officer with UNTAET in 1999. Although Robinson’s first-hand knowledge sets his account of the 1999 violence in East Timor apart from other writing on the subject, and excels in capturing the uncertainty and confusion of the period, Robinson’s UN work also drives much of the book’s content. For example, he goes to great lengths to explain positions taken by the UN Political Affairs office regarding issues such as the timing of electoral registration in East Timor prior to the referendum. While this may be of some interest to those concerned with the internal politics of international governmental organizations such as the UN, the broader issue of how the UN mission influenced the violence, and was itself ultimately influenced by it, fails to receive sufficient treatment in Robinson’s account.

The combination of history and personal memoir makes for an interesting read, but it causes one to wonder whether some of Robinson’s conclusions are based on historical
evidence or personal opinion. This is especially true in Chapter Six when Robinson describes patterns of pro-Indonesia militia violence during the UNTAET mission. Robinson shifts back and forth from his singular voice “I” to a plural “we” which seems to encompass the approximately 800 international staff and volunteers that comprised UNTAET. 20 This blurring between first- and second- or even third-hand accounts detracts from the book’s overall historical value, but seems necessary for Robinson to provide us with a holistic picture of on-the-ground developments in the early days of the referendum-related violence.

Both due to and in spite of Robinson’s place within the historical narrative, this book is a rich and unique contribution to the study of East Timor, and political violence more generally. It draws on an array of material including historical archives, witness testimony, and personal observation. Robinson provides insight not only into the challenges that international interventions encounter on the ground, but also the importance of persevering in spite of these challenges. As the case of East Timor illustrates, international intervention is not always a boon. Unfortunately for the people of East Timor, it took more than two decades after the Indonesian intervention for the political conditions necessary for UN involvement to arise. Yet even after a UN presence was established and independence achieved, the country faced major episodes of political violence that prompted further UN intervention in the security sector. It is therefore essential that members of the international community act in concert to uphold the current consensus regarding “the right and responsibility to prevent egregious acts of violence by states against their citizens” by intervening when the appropriate conditions for success are in place and remaining committed until the outcomes of intervention are assured. 21 Hopefully, any future international intervention in Syria or elsewhere will result in the development of political and social institutions that render state-led violence against civilians unthinkable.

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2 By November of 1975, the Indonesian government claimed that over 40,000 refugees had spilled over into the western half of the island of Timor, part of the Indonesian province of Nusa Tenggara Timur, requiring the government to spend about 100 million rupiah on their care. Republic of Indonesia, Department of Foreign Affairs. 1975. The Question of Portuguese Timor. Jakarta: The Department of Information, Republic of Indonesia, 24.


4 The Portuguese colonial army (Tropas) had both local volunteers and conscripts, with all Timorese men required to do thirty days of military service. By the early 1970s, approximately 2,000 Timorese were serving in the colonial army with a “great many” deserting and joining the militias of political parties during decolonization. Robinson 2009, 25–26.


6 Notably, this dynamic is the mirror image of that which occurred with the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. In spite of the presence of approximately 130,000 active-duty US troops in Iraq in 2007, violence between Sunni and Shi’a factions in the country escalated to the level of a civil war and led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.

7 Archival documents indicate that the United States, under the Ford administration, accepted the annexation of East Timor in part to obviate Foreign Assistance Act restrictions on the use of arms supplied by the United States through its foreign assistance programs. Furthermore, Simpson notes that Australian officials took the April 1977 visit of a congressional delegation and Richard Holbrooke, then Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, to Jakarta to imply de

United Nations Security Council. 1967. By which the Council again called upon all States to respect the territorial integrity of East Timor and on Indonesia to withdraw its forces. 22 April. S/RES/389.


Yale Professor of History Ben Kiernan also terms the Indonesian invasion and occupation of East Timor a genocide, citing use of the term by Xanana Gusmão, current Prime Minister and former President of East Timor and a major rebel leader. Kiernan 2003, 212.

Robinson 2009, 49. Furthermore, Robinson continues to argue that “what is most striking about the violence in East Timor is the almost complete absence of underlying ethnic or religious tensions prior to or even after 1975.” Robinson 2009, 229.


Robinson 2009, 45.

Ibid., 116.

Nevins also draws on his experience as part of the International Federation for East Timor Observer Project during the UN-run vote in East Timor. Nevins’ account lacks much of the deep historical perspective found in Robinson’s work because the discussion is largely situated in terms of US reaction to the events of 9/11. See Joseph Nevins. 2005. A Not-So-Distant Horror: Mass Violence in East Timor. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
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