DIPLOMACY IN A NON-POLAR WORLD

A Conversation with Ambassador Ryan Crocker

YJIA: Ambassador Crocker, in your career you have been posted to many countries in the greater Middle East, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and Qatar, and you just returned from a trip to Egypt. Most of these nations are wracked by active fighting or massive internal unrest. Is diplomacy a viable solution to these problems?

Crocker: To the extent that outside actors are able to have an impact, and we need to be a bit modest in assessing how we can direct some of these very powerful indigenous forces, it’s only through diplomacy. Take Syria, for example. As you mentioned, I just came back from a conference over the weekend that focused on Syria with members of the Syrian opposition, regional governments, Russia, China. I was the American. While the Gulf is pushing a military solution, it’s simply not viable. The Syrian opposition is itself badly fragmented: no one really knows who all of them are, who they’re allied with, what they’re likely to do if they get power. It would be an extremely dangerous undertaking – more likely to have negative than positive consequences. But, I do think there is scope for a negotiated settlement on the part of Syrians themselves, obviously, regional states, and the international community, led by the United States. And what that would involve is, first, getting our minds around the fact that the so-called regime does not consist solely of fight-to-the-death, Bashar al-Assad supporters. Better to think of it as an establishment, many of whose members are simply civil servants, but they don’t want to lose their livelihoods, and they’re afraid that if the armed opposition comes to power, because they served the regime, they could pay for it with their lives. There are many in the middle class who don’t like Bashar at all but are scared to death of what this opposition stands for. There are Alawites, similarly, not very fond of Bashar, but feel that if the radical Sunni ascendency comes into being, as Alawites, they’re toast. Same with Christians. So, what emerged out of this discussion is an effort at outreach, both to elements of the opposition that are inclined toward a negotiated settlement, and that would include its leader, and elements of this so-called establishment who are not Bashar loyalists. And, what you may do, in the process, is help bring into existence a moderate middle composed, again, both of those who have publicly stood against Bashar and those who aren’t really for him either but don’t like the alternatives. So that
is a very long answer to a very short question but there is nothing simple about Middle East diplomacy. The only way you’re going to get a settlement, or an end to this, is going to be through diplomacy and, I think, the United States needs to be more active than we have been because staking out a position that says “Bashar must go” and then sitting back and watching hundreds of thousands of Syrians get killed—that’s not a policy.

YJIA:  The era in which we live now has been called many things: the “Post-Cold War era,” the “Post-9/11 era,” and even an “Era of Confusion.” Is there a more focused or more applicable way to describe or characterize the current era of U.S. policy?

Crocker:  At the broadest level, it is the existence of either a multipolar or non-polar world. There was a brief period after the first Gulf War in which we thought there was a chance of shaping what we optimistically called a “New World Order.” That didn’t happen. So we are in a world in which regional players have substantially more influence than they did during the Cold War and in which we may be and are still the dominant power but not the determinant power. In other words, we cannot simply impose solutions. What does that mean practically? It means we have to understand countries, communities, and issues in their own terms in a way that we did not necessarily have to do during the Cold War. But now we’ve got to understand all the messy little peculiarities and particularities of, say, Syria. How did this fight start? Who are those guys? What do they want? What are the consequences of the conflict continuing? What happens in Iraq? What happens in Turkey? What happens in Jordan? What happens in Israel? What happens in Lebanon? We have to ask a lot more questions that are a lot harder to answer in this non-polar world we’re living in. Never before has there been a greater need for diplomats with language capability and area experience; you can’t figure this stuff out from Washington.

YJIA:  What is, and what should be, the relationship between three of the major national-level international affairs agencies in the United States: the Department of State, the intelligence community, and the Department of Defense? Are there gaps in the relationships between these organizations that still need to be plugged? How do international affairs practitioners help or hinder these relationships?

Crocker:  Well, Washington could certainly take a useful lesson from the field. You know, I’ve had the privilege twice—as Ambassador to Iraq and to Afghanistan—to serve with superb military officers including Commanders General Petraeus and General Odierno in Iraq, and General Allen in Afghanistan. General Petraeus and I decided before we even got to Iraq, when he was still at Fort Leavenworth and I was still Ambassador to Pakistan, that we had to knit ourselves and our organizations up very tightly, and before we ever got there, we’d formed a joint strategic assessment
team led by a military officer and a foreign service officer and equal parts civilians and military to look at our strategy and then begin drafting a strategy document that we would both sign and that would guide our actions. So we were joint right from the beginning on the hypothesis that a tightly coordinated, fully integrated team effort might not guarantee success but the absence of that would surely guarantee failure. And the intelligence community was very much a part of all this, you know, just superb, trilateral relationships. And, in fairness, it’s worked pretty well in Washington since the departure of Don Rumsfeld in 2006.

If you look at the history of U.S. foreign policy structure since the beginning of the Cold War and the creation of a National Security Advisor, you will see that personalities count. Personalities count hugely in foreign and domestic politics, and we have seen that the norm in many cases is friction, not collaboration. Powell and Rumsfeld—a bitter, bitter enmity; Vance and Brzezinski when Brzezinski was National Security Advisor—absolutely, totally at odds, and there are consequences for that kind of enmity! One of the reasons Iraq was just a mess in the early goings was because of that friction between Powell and Rumsfeld. One of the reasons we got taken by surprise and were unable to devise a coherent policy in the run-up to and aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, was because of the Vance-Brzezinski rivalry. Weinberger and Schultz—absolutely could not abide each other and, again, not exactly by coincidence, what happened on their watch? Lebanon 1982. The bombing of the Marine barracks and embassy in 1983.

YJIA: And you were there then, correct?

Crocker: I was there. So, you know, policy disputes often have their roots in personal conflict. Our system often fosters that conflict. Ultimately, it’s up to the President. He gets the security team that he deserves and, if he is not prepared to step in when personalities start to take over rational policy discussions—and Reagan was very detached on this—you get the kinds of disasters that you see. Again, the good news is, with the advent of Bob Gates of Defense in 2006, he forged a very strong relationship with Condoleezza Rice which carried over to Hillary Clinton, and then Leon Panetta, a veteran of so many bureaucratic engagements, has learned a lot the hard way about how not to do it so that when he moved over to Defense he saw that relationship with Clinton as just paramount. And with Petraeus at CIA, again, knew it all—been there, done that—knew how important teamwork was. So, we have been through a period of coming on seven years of unprecedentedly close operation and coordination between the three principle communities, I just hope we can continue it. And you know, it starts at the top: if the two Secretaries are synched up, that’s the message that goes down the line and everyone plays nice together. If they’re not, you have bitterness, backbiting, and sabotage all the way back down the line, and I’ve lived through both.

YJIA: Many of the people we have spoken with in the past have addressed concerns over a gap between academia and international affairs practitioners, and many others have written recently in other publications about their concerns over a widening civil-military divide inside the United States. In your career as a diplomat and in academia, you have had exposure to an enormous cross-section of American society,
including extensive experience with the military. In fact, you were made an Honorary Marine. Do you think a divide exists between America and its armed forces? If so, what do you think can be done to address it?

Crocker: Well, these are excellent questions and the answer on the first is: yes and no. The “no” part is what we were just talking about. I think because the conflicts we see are inherently political-military affairs, you don’t have the People’s Army crossing the Yalu River by the thousands. That would be a military affair. You’ve got these very complex conflicts in which, in some cases, military force is essential but it is being used in a political context so you’ve got to have the diplomacy right if your force is going to be effective. And we’ve learned how to do that overseas. Also, of course, bringing in the intelligence dimension. So in that sense, at the tip of the spear, the understanding and the coordination is better than it has ever been. So that’s the “no” part of the answer. The “yes” part of the answer is one that really worries me. We are an all-volunteer force. This is good. There’s never been a period in which the American military has been more capable and better disciplined than it is right now. But it’s self-selecting and you tend to see sons and daughters following fathers and sometimes mothers into the military because it’s a family tradition, and I do believe that the military is increasingly isolated, as a result, from the population at large. What struck me, coming back from Afghanistan, is not so much that there was widespread, public opposition to the war, it was almost as though, “What war? We still have troops there? Why on earth are we doing that?” We are profoundly not a nation at war because, in the absence of national service, or something akin to it, most people aren’t touched by it and many people don’t even know anyone in the military. And I’m just not sure that is a healthy state of affairs for a great democracy like ours. I know my friends in the military do feel that sense of isolation. When they deploy, if their families are not living on base, they tend to be pretty isolated in their communities and that’s tough.

YJIA: After more than a decade of persistent conflict in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere around the world, the United States seems understandably reluctant to assume a conspicuous leadership role in troubled areas such as Egypt, Syria, and Mali. Is “leading from behind” and providing covert/clandestine support effective policy? Under what circumstances might the United States intervene in another conflict in the Middle East or northern Africa?

Crocker: Foreign policies, in any democracy, are driven by domestic concerns – it’s just the way it is. And the American people are tired of these conflicts, tired of the cost, and, clearly, the political leadership is aware of that. The recent State of the Union address was very Jeffersonian, very focused on what needs to be done at home and clearly that is where the concentration of this Administration is in its second term. At the same time, the President has announced he will go to the Middle East for his first visit next month. We have a very, very experienced Secretary of State who understands the importance of engagement and U.S. leader-
ship and, the Senate willing, very shortly you’ll have an equally experienced Secretary of Defense. So we will not be absent.

That said, we cannot do it all. We should not try to do it all—we have to pick our interventions carefully. Where can we make a difference? Where will our absence make a negative difference? And then we have to work, as the President has repeatedly emphasized, very closely with our allies, both in the region and internationally. Mali is a great example. The French said, “We’ll do it if you can drive the bus” — they didn’t have enough air lift — so, you know, we flew them in. But the only armed Americans on that mission were those responsible for the security of the aircraft; it was a French fight which they prosecuted very ably because they’re darn good soldiers. So figuring out who may have the means and the desire to step in is part of our diplomatic mission.

In the case of Syria, because of the deadlock among China, Russia, and the United States in the Security Council, this lends itself to a more regional initiative, and the Egyptians are prepared to lead it, working with the Iranians, the Saudis, and the Turks. I think that’s an initiative that deserves our full support as we step up our own engagement along the lines we were talking about — trying to see what we can do, through contacts with Syrians of various political leanings to encourage a settlement. You know, I think the President made the right call last summer when he did not support an initiative to begin arming Syrian opposition, but that doesn’t mean that we won’t do anything; it means we shift to the diplomatic track.

And, again, you can’t fix every problem in the world — we don’t have the resources and some of them are beyond our means to influence. We’re a nation of values but, at the same time, we’ve got to be a little cold-eyed on this: what is vital to our interest and what lends itself to an American engagement, preferably with others that will have a positive outcome? Because if you don’t get a “yes” answer on both of those, probably not a good idea to wade into it.

YJIA: Does the United States’ seeming lack of focus on Africa influence Islamic fundamentalism and could it be a flashpoint for a resurgence of al Qaeda-type terrorism?

Crocker: I think we have a pretty close eye on what’s going on in Africa as it relates to al Qaeda. Certainly we know they’re in Somalia, we watch that intensely and have intervened in Mali, for example, with the French. Al Qaeda is not going to go away because what these guys have learned over a couple hundred years of dealing with powerful Western armies is that when they come after you, disappear; head for the hills, literally. Which is what they did in Mali. They’re not going to be around forever. So we’ll have to figure out a long-term strategy to keep them under control.

This also goes back to the earlier question. Sadly, there are some tragic and significant issues that we just don’t have the leverage or the resources to invest, nor does such an investment look like it’s going to pay a dividend in terms of peace. The Congo would be one of them. God bless the UN peacekeepers who are at least trying to keep something of a lid on it, but I don’t think there’s much we can, or should, do there. Al Qaeda is not in the Congo; it’s a terrible human tragedy for people who have now spent decades struggling through this, but it just doesn’t lend itself to a significant U.S. intervention. So we’ll go after al Qaeda wherever we find them — you know, Libya, Somalia, Mali. The
instability in Libya is worrisome. The attack on the gas facility [in Algeria], of course, was largely staged by al Qaeda coming out of Libya, the facility is right on the border. Again, we’ve got to work with our own assets, we’ve got to work with our international partners, and we’ve got to work with regional governments to stay focused and ahead on this—and I think that’s exactly what we’re trying to do. But no one should think it’s going to be easy. Al Qaeda moves to ungoverned space and with the fallout of the Arab Spring they now have a lot more of it than they used to to burrow in and strengthen their capabilities, whether it be, again, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and now, Syria.

YJIA: Let’s shift gears for a second to South and East Asia. Given China’s economic and military expansion, India’s lingering wariness of China, and persistent India/Pakistan tensions, would it be safe to say that Pakistan could conceivably become the center of gravity for U.S. foreign policy in Asia even after the Strategic Pivot?

Crocker: We have got to pay careful attention to what’s happening in Pakistan. You know, I was Ambassador there from 2004 to 2007 and, going back to Afghanistan, which gives you a pretty good vantage point on Pakistan, it is frightening how conditions in Pakistan have deteriorated. The militants are gaining ground and they come in numerous flavors. The Pakistani Taliban have targeted both the military forces of Pakistan and its civilian politicians. That organization didn’t even exist when I left. Radical Sunni groups that have been around for a long time, like Lashkar-e-Taiba, have carried out a series of very brazen attacks, including [in March 2013] in Baluchistan, deliberately targeting Shi’a in an effort to create sectarian strife in Pakistan.

We have had a very complex and often difficult relationship with Pakistan. We both need to take a deep breath and commit ourselves to a strategic partnership over the long run. The Pakistanis continue to fear we're going to just pull out of the area as we did after the Soviet withdrawal at the beginning of the 1990s and leave them with an unsustainable mess in Afghanistan at a time when they’re fighting an insurgency or insurrections on their own territory that are not disconnected from those in Afghanistan. And that, you know, the issue of Pakistani tolerance, if not support, for the Afghan Taliban is a case in point. Why do they do it? Multiple reasons but probably the most significant is that they feel they can’t afford another powerful enemy if the U.S. isn’t going to be around. Their fear is they start applying significant pressure on Taliban in Pakistan, to the point of open hostility, and then we say, “Oh, we’re done again,” and they are left with not only the mess they currently have but also an Afghan Taliban that will be out to get them. Their enemy card, I think, is pretty well filled for the next set of dances.

YJIA: Should the United States still be as heavily involved as it is in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Crocker: Well the answer is yes, we should. Part of my mission in both countries was to negotiate the framework for that involvement over time (the Strategic Framework Agreement in Iraq and the Strategic Partnership Agreement in Afghanistan). Iraq, in its modern history—certainly since 1958—has existed in terms of enmity in the region and with the West, particularly the United States. We now have the opportunity to change that by implementing the framework agreement and have something we
haven’t had since the fall of the monarchy in ’58: a western-looking Iraq that sees its interests as best fulfilled through a close relationship with the United States. That’s worth having, given what we in the region have suffered from, that is, an Iraq that was otherwise oriented. Oddly enough, it’s something we can agree with the Iranians on. There was a vicious eight-year war between Iraq and Iran that Saddam Hussein started. So yes, it is very much in our long-term interest to see that the relationship remains close, that we remain engaged, and the good news is—since Iraq has the potential to be the world’s second-largest oil producer after Saudi Arabia—it doesn’t really cost us anything. They can pay for it.

In the case of Afghanistan, with the very potent Taliban threat as we draw down, we’ve seen that movie. We know how it turns out. If we turn our back on Afghanistan and the Taliban retake control of significant swaths of the country, as they had in the nineties, al Qaeda’s coming back. And that’s where they want to be. They operated very effectively out of there, they planned 9/11 out of there, and they would do it again. So we have the strongest national security imperatives for seeing that that does not happen and that we modulate our force drawdowns in a way that insures the Afghan military can keep the Taliban from retaking control. There is precedent for this, too. When the Soviets withdrew in 1989, the Afghan army didn’t collapse. They were more than a match for the Mujahedin factions that they were up against for the next three years until 1992 when the money ran out and they didn’t get paid anymore. That’s when the army collapsed, and that’s what the Chicago NATO summit last May [2012] was all about: commitments from NATO and others, led by the United States, for the long-term financial support of the Afghan National Security Forces. It will probably cost us about two-and-a-half billion dollars a year, with the Afghans themselves and the international community picking up another billion-and-a-half for a total of four billion. Two-and-a-half billion is a lot of money, per year, but when you compare it to the hundred billion a year right now we’re spending in Afghanistan, that’s pretty cheap insurance.

YJIA: What role should diplomacy play following the cessation of major upheaval in areas of national interest where the United States historically does not have a close working relationship?

Crocker: Again, it requires a careful process of defining what and where are our key interests. What’s really important to us, and why? And when you have your top ten or twenty, how are those interests best pursued? We have a wide array of instruments of power; which ones make the most sense? Which of our allies may be better positioned to take actions that further our own aims because those aims are also theirs? You know we did this thing fairly effectively in the case of Libya during the military campaign where it was a NATO operation with U.S. involvement but it wasn’t a U.S. lead. And the more coalition opportunities there are, the better for us, because the breadth of engagement in itself is positive, but it also makes it look like it’s not the United States throwing its weight around unilaterally again. And it’s more economical. You kind of have to do that triage. Yes, we should be engaged everywhere, but no, we don’t have the resources or, frankly, the interests...
to be “all in” everywhere. So it’s that process of triage, I think, that makes sense.

There’s something called “Alexander’s question.” There’s a wonderful book called Thinking in Time by [Richard] Neustadt and [Ernest] May, which is the closest thing I’ve found to a diplomatic “how-to” handbook. And Alexander’s question is: what will it take to change your assumptions? One of the biggest traps in diplomacy and national security thinking is coming to a conclusion about a set of conditions in another country and assuming that those conditions will never change. That’s what we did in 1979 in Iran. So in areas of key interest to the United States, you have to constantly be monitoring and constantly asking yourself Alexander’s question: when will I know that reality is changing, what do those changes mean, and how am I (the United States) going to have to adjust to meet those changes in an effective manner? Because you want to be out and ahead of it, not trying to catch up to it once it’s out of the barn.

YJIA: Do you think that one of the problems in achieving success in Afghanistan is that too many people tried to treat Afghanistan like Iraq?

Crocker: I have kind of a counter-orthodox view on that. It wasn’t so much that we tried to treat it like Iraq, it’s that we tried to do too much. Afghanistan has a very traditional, very conservative society. You know, we think roads are great because populations can move, farmers and manufacturers can get goods to market, kids can get to schools, and so forth. Well that is not a universally accepted notion in Afghanistan. An absence of roads also keeps people out, and a lot of Afghan villagers prefer it that way. So, if you’re going to do major projects, be sure that you have full host country buy-in at the local as well as the national level. Don’t be building things people don’t want. You also have to be sure — and this is a lesson we learned painfully in Iraq and are doing a little better at it in Afghanistan — it’s something they can maintain. If you build it to U.S. standards and hand them the keys, chances are it’s going to be out of business in months because they simply don’t have the expertise or the budgets to operate it. Right now, where we have built major roads, the Ring Road that connects all the major population centers, where is the budget to maintain it? So that’s kind of a scramble. These were not issues in Iraq, because, again, the Iraqis have the money. It’s another reason why following the Chicago NATO Summit in May of last year we had the Tokyo Economic Ministerial in July, which resulted in international community pledges of about sixteen million dollars in the out year just to take care of these kinds of things. So I think we did learn a lot, certainly made a lot of mistakes, that, as painful as they were, I hope will help us the next time around because there’s going to be a next time around.

YJIA: What types of investments do you think the United States could, or should, invest in in Afghanistan? Are there durable or human development investments
that could be made there that would yield efficient positive results? Are unilateral investments even possible, multilateral (as you just mentioned in Japan)? Who would be taking the lead, who would be a useful or what would be a useful intermediary?

Crocker: Well you touch on a very important point, which is donor coordination. Too often, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, we were not working in full coordination or with full visibility on what others were doing with host country authorities or other donors. And that gives you the opposite of the buy-in you need to make this work. So, priority one, you sit down with the Afghans and say, “How do you see this country in ten years? What do you need that you don’t have? Where would you like to see the focus of the systems?” It needs to be their list. I think . . . I know, that that list places a heavy emphasis on the development of human capital. That means education, it means health care, it means jobs; it helps the Afghans develop a higher level of literacy; it ensures that as young Afghans leave schools, there is something productive for them to go to; it’s the importance of job creation. Why? Because obviously it’s the right thing to do, but also because a post-Taliban generation of Afghans who have come of age and been educated in a free society is a bulwark against re-Talibanization that may be as important as a capable Afghan National Security Force. And that’s what you see when you visit Afghan universities or talk to recent graduates.

Afghanistan has never had a generation like this—Westward-looking, liberal in their outlooks and their education. Women have been empowered in a totally unprecedented way. They are twenty-seven percent of Parliament. The constitution mandates twenty-five, but several women simply won on their own! Women are in business, they are in government. That’s what we want to get behind, and we’ve done a pretty good job. When I opened our embassy in Kabul in the beginning of 2002 there were nine hundred thousand students in Afghan schools—no girls. When I left this last summer, there were 8.4 million students, forty percent of them girls. Healthcare, which we’ve placed a great emphasis on, in coordination with the Afghan authorities, has improved dramatically. Life expectancy over the past decade has gone up by almost seventeen years, from forty-three to sixty, because of the huge investment in training healthcare workers and establishing and supplying clinics so that seventy-five percent of the population is now within a two-hour walk of medical treatment. And, given the overwhelmingly rural nature of Afghanistan and its topography, which is challenging to say the least, it’s quite an issue. Putting your investment in human development is absolutely key. But job creation does mean other things. Our last major projects are in the power generation field. You can’t make many jobs if you don’t have the power to run factories or run much of anything else.
YJIA: NPR credited you as the individual who worked out the details of the partnership agreement that helps define the long-term partnership between the U.S. and Afghanistan. Who do you think should replace President Karzai in 2014? How will Karzai’s departure impact the drawdown of U.S. and NATO troops in 2014 and the handover to Afghan military forces?

Crocker: Well, who replaces President Karzai obviously has to be an Afghan choice. We, and others in the international community, need to facilitate the process on a technical level: helping with registration lists, preparing polling places, that sort of thing. But we need to stay completely clear of the politics of this. There is a wide perception we did not do so in the 2009 elections and that has hurt us.

Again—history, history, history—the Afghans, like the Iraqis, like most of the region, are all too accustomed to foreigners coming in and interfering in their politics. We need to demonstrate that we’re not going to do that. And there are a couple of principles, most important being that there is an election as scheduled. President Karzai has said there will be, and he will not seek an extra-constitutional third term. So that is an important development. It’s also a challenge because Karzai has been at the helm since basically the establishment of the new Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, and it’s a little scary. For all his flaws and all the criticism he’s received, I think he’s going to go down in history as a highly significant figure. In part because, although a Pashtun and careful of this Pashtun base, he’s a true Afghan nationalist. And that operates at two levels. He spends a lot of time talking to Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, and Turkmen leaders to show that he cares about them, that they are well represented in government, that they don’t feel that Pashtun domination is back, just under a different form. Although it’s given us fits at times, it’s been very important for his legitimacy and that of his government that he’s a nationalist in the sense of “Afghanistan is an independent state and it is not going to be told what to do by anyone,” including us. Which is why these agreements were important, because it really did establish a long-term strategic relationship between two equal parties and it was something he could take to a Loya Jirga and get full support and buy-in. He was very wise on that. Early on in the negotiations, he convened a Loya Jirga to put to them the proposition, “should we, or should we not, have a long-term strategic partnership with the United States?” And the overwhelming response was, “yes, we should.” That strengthened him considerably in the negotiations because he had the people behind him and was not in a position of negotiating an agreement that he then had to sell to the people. They had already bought it. He was responding to a popular demand.

So he has been a very effective leader in many respects, facing overwhelming challenges. He will remain in Afghanistan after the election, he’ll probably remain on the palace grounds because that’s the only place he’s really safe. And that means that whoever the next president of Afghanistan is has to be someone with whom Hamid Karzai literally can live. The Pakistanis have a pithy little phrase, “two men, one grave.” It’s you or me. It was coined in the 1970s when Zia-ul-Haq overthrew Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Zia-ul-Haq was considering—the situation having stabilized—handing power back to Bhutto. Somebody tapped him on the shoulder and said, “Hey boss, guess what?
The first thing he’s going to do is have you tried and executed for overthrowing a democratically elected government.” So instead, Zia-ul-Haq had Bhutto executed. It’s why Maliki fought so hard to see that Allawi did not emerge as Prime Minister because Maliki thought he would then not only have lost an election—he’d lose his life. He, in turn, has had capital charges brought against the former vice president of Iraq because he fears that that element of the Sunni community seeks to return to power by force. Meanwhile, Tariq al-Hashimi, the Vice President, fears for his life because he’s got a death sentence on him. We’ve got to remember, liberal democracies don’t emerge overnight. And the very tools of those democracies, the laws and so forth, can be used for pretty extreme purposes. So that doesn’t mean Hamid Karzai gets to be kingmaker, but it does mean he’s got to be comfortable with whoever follows after him. And that’s something we have to understand as well.

YJIA: You are quoted as having said, “The job of the career foreign service officer is to offer his best advice as policy is formulated and then to implement that policy.” Do you still feel that description holds true?

Crocker: Absolutely. Nobody elects Foreign Service officers any more than they elect military officers. But both groups swear the same oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic. The Constitution of the United States stipulates that the country is run by elected officials. Policy is made at one end of Pennsylvania Avenue and it’s resourced at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, in all cases by elected officials. So again, you don’t want a military or civilian bureaucracy who think they know better than the leaders the people chose. We may have our moments when we think we know better, but we have no right to try to circumvent, sabotage, or do anything else except loyally and faithfully carry out the policies that those leaders set. We have the same right and obligation to be as clear as we can in the formulation process of where we see downsides or what preferable options might be, and to be sure that our elected leaders understand, as completely as they can, what it is they’re making decisions on. But again, once that decision is made, you salute and you move forward. It was no secret that I had very deep reservations about the military intervention in Iraq, and actually wrote a memo laying out what could happen. But when the decision was made, I was in Iraq immediately. I got to Iraq nine days after Saddam’s statue came down in Baghdad in April 2003. And it didn’t matter anymore what I thought about the war, because the war was on.

YJIA: A July 2012 article in the New York Times quoted you as offering three pieces of advice to policy makers: 1) remember the law of unintended consequences; 2) recognize the limits of the United States’ capabilities; and 3) understand that
getting out can be as dangerous and destructive as the original conflict. Even with the examples of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, do you think these lessons will be heeded by future policy makers and international affairs practitioners? Is there anything you would add to these three lessons?

**Crocker:** There are all sorts of corollaries to my three grand theorems. [jokingly] But it is pretty basic. Be careful what you get into—that’s the unintended consequences part. And understand that there is no amount of planning that is going to prepare you for every eventuality that follows a major policy initiative and there is no greater initiative than a military intervention, because then you’re talking about thirtieth- and fortieth-order consequences that are totally unforeseeable.

An example is Lebanon in 1982—the Israeli invasion that summer with the famous green light from then-Secretary of State Alexander Haig, because what could be wrong about getting rid of the PLO, which was carrying out some pretty nasty stuff against Israel from its safe havens in southern Lebanon? Well, we played right into Syria’s hands. Syria wanted to get rid of the PLO too, because they saw a *de facto* Palestinian state as a threat to their own regime. So when the PLO sailed out of Beirut Harbor at the end of the summer of 1982 under the watchful eyes of U.S. Marines, Syria then just picked up where the Israelis left off and pushed them out of Akkar in north Lebanon so that a year later the remnants of the PLO were boarding ships in the northern port of Tripoli. And who came after them? [Hezbollah.] Way, way worse. Did any of us foresee this, when the Israelis crossed the line of departure in June 1982? Nope. But again, think long, think hard, go sit under a tree, contemplate the verities and decide if you really want to do this. But once you’re in, you’re in. And that was an argument that David Petraeus and I made to Congress in our testimony in 2007: That if you decide you’re tired of it, it costs too much, it didn’t work out right, the assumptions were incorrect, time to pull pitch and head home, think carefully about what may happen next.

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– *Interview conducted by Charles Faint and Lindsey Walters.*

*Transcribed and edited by Lindsey Walters and Ewa D’Silva.*