

The Canon Institute for Global Studies

Professor Henry Nau Seminar:

"Between Intervention and Isolation"

(Summary)

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America is not as powerful as it used to be, and this is in part by design. Since 1945, America has pursued a policy of actually helping others catch up and become our competitors. As these countries have gained self-confidence, they have contributed to the global economy. In America, we have realized that we can no longer lead the world without strong allies. In helping to foster the growth and development of strong allies, the dynamic between isolationist and interventionist policies must be considered.

In response to these new dynamics, America's role in the world is changing. In the U.S., we had a jolting experience with September 11, an attack on our soil where we lost over 3000 citizens. This was a huge blow to the American public. As a result, the American public backed a very aggressive foreign policy, an interventionist policy. We were determined to deal with that threat militarily, and within a few months we were able to depose the Taliban government in Afghanistan. This "all-in approach" tends to focus primarily on military intervention and does not sufficiently consider how to convert military success into diplomatic success. I am very critical of the Bush administration for failing to make a diplomatic success out of their military success. They needed a diplomatic strategy for making a series of agreements in the region; most importantly with Iran on nuclear weapons. In the summer of 2003, Iran actually approached the United States about dealing with the nuclear issue because they felt threatened about the developments in the region. We ignored that opportunity, and it was a major misstep. We could have had an agreement with Iran or the Taliban on the nuclear program. We might have launched a Middle East Peace Agreement in 2003. However, we did not do that until 2007 when the situation had already deteriorated.

Another characteristic of this all-in approach is that we now wanted to spread democracy in the countries we invaded and overthrew the governments. This is of course far too ambitious – it cannot be sustained. Therefore, the American people switched rather abruptly in 2007-09 from an all-in approach to "an all-out approach." Indeed, President Obama was elected largely on a platform of getting America out of the Middle East and maybe even out of the world.

In this all-out approach, we want nothing to do with the military arm of strategy. We have deliberately stayed out of almost all of the areas visited by considerable violence in recent years – for example Syria, and the Russian aggression in Crimea and Ukraine. In Asia, we have tried to take a distant approach to the more aggressive policies of China. Instead of military, we want to use diplomacy. This strategy – trying to solve every problem diplomatically not militarily, has been the strategy of the Obama administration.

For example, he has been working on the Iran nuclear deal framework for six or seven years. However, there are compromises and limits with this approach. Despite the fact that President Obama has been pretty consistent in his all-out approach, we have seen escalating violence around the world. The Middle East is much more violent today and the situation in Ukraine is worse. In addition, Chinese interventions in the island chains are occurring with more frequency. I think it is necessary to find a balance between the all-out and all-in approach to ensure U.S. leadership in the world economic and security environment. We have to do this in cooperation with our allies, particularly Japan.

This debate is happening in the U.S. as we speak, and is a central issue of the presidential election. One of my observations about the election has been that most of the candidates are still taking the all-out approach. No one has made the case of addressing global threats, such as ISIL, militarily. Most of the candidates who are polling well, from both parties, advocate to continue President Obama's approach. These ideas also have great appeal for youth, as represented by Bernie Sanders. Donald Trump also is very clear in his focus on the economic and "moral" might of the U.S. as opposed to military might. Of course, while Sanders for instance takes a more diplomatic approach, Trump takes a more isolationist, nationalistic approach. These are just two examples, but overall most candidates think more in terms of strategy rather than putting military muscle behind American leadership – tending towards an all-out approach. One of the few candidates tending towards an all-in approach is actually Hillary Clinton. She has supported military intervention in her past role as the Secretary of State, but was overruled by President Obama.

I believe we must find a better balance between the all-out and the all-in approach, because neither one has worked very effectively. The all-in approach got us into some real difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan for example, while the all-out approach has not brought more peace and stability in the world.

There are three points we must consider in attempting to find a more constructive and sustainable balance between this tendency to be either all-in or all-out.

The first point is that we must expand our perspective to include not just current threats, but potential future threats as well. For example, how can we influence the Middle East in a way that will improve the overall security environment? This would mean that in the long term, we would not have to spend as much security capital there. We must think about how we can improve the world so that we are not attacked in the future.

Right now, the U.S. is in an all-out mode, and I fear we will not act until we are again attacked.

The second point is that we need a better understanding of how to use military might in diplomacy and international affairs. These two ideas are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The most successful leaders are those who have adopted a syncretic approach to global issues – a strong diplomatic approach and a strong military force. Military force is effective because it can influence one's diplomatic adversary. For example, in the case of Iran, in the context of negotiations surrounding their nuclear program, it can persuade them they will not get a better deal outside of these negotiations. In other words, they cannot win a better deal by acting through use of military force. In this case however, Iran has been consistently pursuing military goals while negotiating, and we have not been pushing back very effectively. My concern is that under the agreement, Iran will continue to pursue their nuclear effort, developing advanced centrifuges for making enriched uranium, and further fomenting terrorism in the region, because we did not make an effective military threat against their nuclear program. I am not saying we should have executed military actions, simply that we should have threatened it, the way Ronald Reagan threatened the Soviet Union.

Ronald Reagan is considered one of the most astute Presidents in U.S. history because he understood how to use the imagery of military threat and action to advance diplomacy; in this case to convince Mikhail Gorbachev of the former U.S.S.R. that he could not compete. In this way, the military can fill a deterrent role. You can make it clear to your diplomatic adversary that they cannot achieve their goals outside the negotiations, and they will become serious about them. Of course, this approach is not without risk. Ronald Reagan was obviously willing to take some risks. I think President Obama has been unwilling to take really any significant risks at all with respect to military force. And if you are unwilling to take risks, then your diplomacy is not going to be very effective.

The final, and most important, point is that we must push for economic reform. Economic stability is how we can maintain presence in the world that anticipates threats and works to improve the environment from which threats emerge. This is exemplified in many ways by the postwar emergence of the U.S., Japan, and the E.U. However, to maintain this, we need fresh thinking because we are coming to the end of a global economic expansion cycle, based in large part on stimulus policies and quantitative easing. We need structural reforms. This is true in the U.S., and it is also true in Japan. In Japan, you are facing serious and ongoing budget deficit, and this is being addressed,

in part, through raising the consumption tax. However, I do not think this is the best approach. We should focus on the tax regulatory system, think creatively about it and clean it up, trying to make incentives more appealing. We must unleash another expansion of investment and growth.

Another reason that a strong global economy is key is that open democratic pluralistic societies do not go to war with one another. There is very heavy statistical evidence in the research that has been done on this in political science, showing that countries with flexible democratic systems do not go to war with one another. They do not even get involved in military disputes with one another. It stands to reason that the more such countries there are, the more peaceful the world is going to be.

I believe that democracy is universal. It's not American, it's not Japanese, it's not Eastern, and it's not Western. There are three things essential to democracy and they are all possible in any culture. The first requirement is opposing parties rotating peacefully in power through free and fair elections. I think this is something that develops over a very long period of time. The second requirement is that the military establishment in any country is under the control of the elected official. Finally, some measure of civil liberties are needed. Individual rights - of property, to vote, of free speech, to assemble – must be protected.

Democracy is not easy. Making the environment better through the spread of democracy is not something that is going to happen in a year or even in a decade. It takes a very long time, and a coordinated effort and commitment –this has happened over a period of 75 years. We also get into too many scrapes – too many conflicts – at once when we try to use our military capability to support our diplomacy. It is easy to get overextended because we are unwilling to set priorities – priorities in terms of where the battle for freedom is the most important in the world. For example, is it the most important in Iraq and in Afghanistan, or is it more important in Ukraine or on the Korean peninsula?

The future of the Korean peninsula will have a major influence on the stability of the region. By the same token, in Europe, Ukraine is the central issue in terms of the future of democracy in that region. Unfortunately, the U.S. put an enormous amount of effort into the Middle East over the past decade and neglected the problems that were developing in Ukraine and Turkey, two countries that are on the border, as I argued, of existing free countries that are very important for the future of freedom in Europe.

Setting priorities and maintaining focus are both very important – and these foci will be different depending on the region. We must be watchful and vigilant. We must be clear in our policymaking that each battlefront – in Europe, Asia and the Middle East – is important. Overall, however, I believe that the greatest – or at least most complex – threats to democracy are in Europe and Asia, not in the Middle East. In this respect, it is important to adopt a syncretic approach to foreign policy, an approach that strikes a balance between all-in and all-out, and also a balance between diplomacy and military force.

In conclusion, I believe that there is a way in which we can improve the debate in America and between our countries such that the public will understand that there are alternatives to the all-out – isolationist – and all-in – interventionist – approaches. We can find a way to “stay the course.” It has to involve the stay as we have done for 75 years in improvement of the environment in terms of democracy. But it is also important to remember that threats to democracy are most pressing in Europe and in Asia, not in the Middle East and not in South Asia. Therefore we do not want to become over-extended in those areas as we have in the last decade. There can be no effective diplomacy without the use of military muscle, but the purpose of military muscle is to achieve some compromises, not to win a war in the conventional sense.

It is vitally important to reach the point where the U.S. and its allies have a consistent strategy and approach to these issues. This is how the world will become a better place – more peaceful, democratic, and prosperous with more opportunities for growth.