

Bret Stephens' Call for Robust U.S. Foreign Policy

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - November 16, 2014

The disarray of American foreign policy has perilous consequences that are global in reach.

A brief glance reveals numerous setbacks. President Obama's half-hearted surge in Afghanistan permitted the Taliban to regroup. His vaunted “reset” with Russia did not prevent Russian President Vladimir Putin from seizing the Crimean Peninsula and marching into Eastern Ukraine. It might have encouraged him. Obama's high-profile pivot to Asia, carried out by means of ambivalent gestures and toothless diplomacy, has left both an increasingly defiant China and nervous regional rivals baffled about American intentions.

The president's dithering over the construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline, which would boost two countries' economies by transporting Canadian tar sands oil to Texas refineries, illustrates his administration's subordination of foreign policy to domestic partisan politics. The president allowed a win-win economic opportunity to become hostage to the Democratic Party's environmental lobby.

The disarray of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East deserves special mention. Despite abundant evidence that the parties were in no position to make the painful compromises necessary to achieve a comprehensive peace, Obama pushed two failed efforts -- one led by former Sen. George Mitchell and veteran diplomat Dennis Ross, and the other by Secretary of State John Kerry -- to achieve a final-status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

Following December 2010 uprisings in Tunisia and demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square in January 2011, the administration supported Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a longtime American ally, before flip-flopping and demanding his ouster. Subsequently, America recognized Mohammed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood government despite Morsi's authoritarian imposition of Islamic religious law. Then in 2013 the administration opposed the popular uprising that brought to power the Western-leaning government of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, then-head of the Egyptian Armed Forces and now Egypt's elected president.

In early 2011 -- contrary to the advice of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, and CIA Director David Petraeus -- the president declined to arm moderates rebelling against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's Iranian-backed rule. Syria has since deteriorated into a massive humanitarian disaster. Its civil war has claimed approximately 200,000 lives. More than 3 million refugees have fled to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. And some 6 million Syrians have been internally displaced.

Also in early 2011, President Obama led from behind the multinational operation to overthrow Libyan President Moammar Gadhafi, which produced a political vacuum that was filled by jihadists who brought greater violence and instability to Libya than it knew before Gadhafi's demise.

In December 2011, the president snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by refusing to station in Iraq a residual force of American troops. Following America's withdrawal, ISIS arose and Iraq descended into sectarian warfare.

In 2012, Obama declared a red line against Syria's use of chemical weapons. When Assad crossed it in the summer of 2013, Obama blinked. Despite having intervened militarily in Libya without obtaining congressional authorization and indeed denying that he needed it, he announced that before taking military action against Syria he would seek Congress' approval. Again the president blinked: Before Congress could vote, he embraced a Russian initiative to negotiate removal of Assad's chemical arsenal.

Then there's Iran. Candidate Obama boldly declared that while he would prefer to resolve matters diplomatically, he would use all means necessary as president to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. As president, his diplomacy has allowed Iran to reach threshold capacity. Hopes for a diplomatic resolution are dim as we approach the anniversary of the six-month interim agreement that the P5+1 signed with Iran on Nov. 24, 2013, which was supposed to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

Is there a pattern or unifying conviction that underlies such disarray?

Yes says Bret Stephens, the Wall Street Journal's Pulitzer Prize-winning foreign affairs columnist. In "America in Retreat: The New Isolationism and the Coming Global Disorder," he argues that the many debacles of the last six years -- with the striking exception of the White House's dogged intervention in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- are tied together by Obama's determination to scale back America's global responsibilities. "America's retreat -- or what the Obama administration prefers to call 'retrenchment' -- is the central fact of this decade, just as the war on terror was the central fact of the last decade," contends Stephens. It is setting the stage for far worse.

The retreat doctrine, which demands that America do much less to solve the world's problems and much more to deal with America's problems, enjoys bipartisan support. "America is not the world's policeman," declared Obama in September 2013. This echoes Kentucky Republican Sen. Rand Paul's earlier statement that "America's mission should always be to keep the peace, not to police the world."

The opinion of the Democratic president and that of a leading contender for the 2016 GOP presidential nomination, Stephens observes, reflect a powerful current in the American political tradition. The urge to leave a corrupt world to its shabby machinations while concentrating on cultivating an exemplary society in America extends back to the first

Puritans who sought to build in the new world "a city on a hill." In recent years, the aspiration to go it alone has been fueled by the failures in Iraq as well as the 2008 economic collapse and the Great Recession it triggered.

With a command of American history, a mastery of big foreign policy ideas, and a supple grasp of the conundrums of current events, Stephens shows that the dichotomy between domestic and international responsibilities is facile. For the world's sole superpower, international affairs inevitably impinge on our economy and our security. Defending our principles abroad advances our interests at home.

But the world is big and complicated. America's resources and capabilities are limited. The United States can't and shouldn't be everywhere and do everything. By what criteria should we be guided in acting on the international stage?

Stephens wants America to remain the world's policeman. If America abandons the responsibility it assumed after the end of World War II to maintain global order, no nation or group of nations or international organizations will fill the void. In practice, the choice is between America operating as the world's policeman and the world operating without a policeman. The cost of the ensuing chaos to America and the world, he argues, would be intolerable.

"To say America needs to be the world's policeman is not to say we need to be its priest, preaching the gospel of the American way," Stephen writes. "Priests are in the business of changing hearts and saving souls. Cops merely walk the beat, reassuring the good, deterring the tempted, punishing the wicked."

To be the world's policeman is also not to "be the world's martyr," Stephens insists. "Police work is not altruism. It is done from necessity and self-interest. It is done because it has to be and there's no one else to do it, and because the benefits of doing it accrue not only to those we protect but also, indeed mainly, to ourselves."

Stephens envisages an America more active in international affairs than the noninterventionists seek, but more restrained than the Bush freedom agenda proposed at its most ambitious. To capture the spirit of a foreign policy more moderate than that associated with neo-conservatism's foreign policy arm, Stephens invokes an urban public policy associated with neoconservatism's domestic arm: "The broken-windows theory emphasizes the need to put cops on the street, the more the better, creating a sense of presence, enforcing community norms (even when infractions of them are not in direct violation of the law), punishing minor infractions of the law, serving the interests of responsible local stakeholders, cleaning up the parks and streets, tearing down derelict buildings."

A "broken windows" foreign policy would enforce the rules it invokes and defend the principles it proclaims. It would increase spending on the military, maintain a global military presence, support predictability and stability in international affairs, emphasize behavioral

norms over international law, and recognize a special duty to protect "little countries" friendly to our principles "from threatening neighbors."

Neither preoccupied bystander nor crusading savior, a United States that serves as the world's policeman would represent a rehabilitation of American foreign policy with salutary consequences that are global in reach.

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