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“Isolationism” as the Denial of Intervention What Foreign Policy Is and Isn’t

by Earl C. Ravenal

Executive Summary

The tendency of both the Clinton administration and its Republican opponents to frame foreign policy as a compromise between “global policeman” and “isolationism” misses the point entirely. The real issue is what the United States commits itself to defend—and whether it is actually willing to incur the costs and risks required to fulfill such commitments. Structural changes in the international system already greatly limit the options of U.S. policymakers.

Ostensibly moderate foreign policy doctrines such as “selective engagement” and “new internationalism” are operationally meaningless. They erroneously assume that, to one degree or another, the United States can impose its policy preferences around the world, with acceptable costs and risks. Moreover, advocates of so-called selective engagement would end up endorsing almost all of Washington’s current

security obligations and recent military interventions, give or take a couple of strategically and budgetarily trivial cases such as Somalia and Haiti.

Attempts to intervene in other regions—especially with ground forces—will become more difficult and dangerous in the 21st century, in the face of emboldened challengers and the defection of U.S. allies and clients. America’s competent military can inflict great damage on an adversary, but that capability does not translate into an ability to exercise effective and durable political control in far-flung regions. Instead of continuing the forward deployment and contingent use of its military forces in a vain effort to defend a lengthy roster of client states and maintain an illusory global order, the United States should concentrate on developing strike warfare—long-range retaliatory capabilities—to be used to defend only its indisputably vital interests.

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Introduction: Here They Come Again; There They Go Again

Early indications are that the foreign policy side of the 2000 presidential campaign will be run on the basis of “isolationism.”¹ Of course, Patrick Buchanan, late of the Republican Party and now of the Reform Party, gave the politicians and pundits of most parties an obvious target with his idiosyncratically strident version of American isolationism. But the more important point is that there is a confirmed tendency, within both major parties, to cast foreign policy in terms that are almost purely rhetorical (that is, not what political scientists would call “operational”). Even worse, party elites merely split the difference between the unacceptable alternatives of “world’s policeman” and “isolationism.” This is not surprising, given current American public opinion. Not necessarily ignorant, but certainly wishful and the very opposite of logically rigorous, American public opinion, as polled time after time in technically perfect statistical procedures, would instantaneously reject any politician’s proposal of a supposedly extreme orientation toward the world.

And so we have formulations of “new internationalism” and, from the academics, “selective engagement” that promise decisive American influence on important events and dispositions in the world, without the risk of major clashes of force and with affordable military expenditures. Assertions of “new internationalism,” purportedly to reduce the military risks and costs of some politically targeted present administration’s foreign policy, but without reducing America’s effective influence on the conduct of other important nations in the world, are legion and hardly require particular citation; just scan any current month’s speeches by executive-branch aspirants, including ambitious academics.

Proposals of “selective engagement” are also neither recent nor rare.² During the Cold War, various proposals with that theme were

put forward, including one by the author of containment himself, George F. Kennan. I regard “selective engagement” as a pretense, not a strategy, and a political ploy, not a real attempt to build a military program to implement a foreign policy stance. Given a foreign policy stance, the choice of contingencies (and simultaneity) is at least partially beyond the will of the United States alone; it depends, to a significant extent, on challenges by adversaries, in various regions, with various capabilities and propensities for particular types and levels of warfare.³

Those proposals may sound good or they may not, but that is not the point. In fact, it is the problem. In the United States, for some decades, foreign policy has been discussed as a competition of preferred end-states, or right attitudes. Of course, in these terms, “world’s policeman” doesn’t have a chance, and “isolationism” is a complete nonstarter.

In reality, the “new internationalism,” or Gov. George W. Bush’s “distinctly American internationalism,” or any continued internationalism implies a strategy of control. Such a strategy will require more military forces, and certainly more military readiness, and the introduction of virtually all the new generation of weapons systems in the numbers that have been requested by the armed services. Yet “selectivity” of engagement, even if illusory, would unravel America’s present alliances as well as the more extensive informal network of countries that depend on the United States to preserve balances of power and strategic stability in every part of the world.

Why “Setting Priorities” Misses the Point

How would the contending would-be presidential administrations reconcile such operationally contradictory grand strategies? The familiar dodge of setting “priorities” (offered by the foreign policy team advising Gov. George W. Bush, for instance, as some kind of answer to the presumably unprioritized interventionism of the Clinton admin-

istration) requires some analysis. Professor Condoleezza Rice, foreign policy adviser to Republican presidential candidate Bush, calls for a “policy that separates the important from the trivial. . . . It takes courage to set priorities.”⁴ She tries to define that as a “focus” of “U.S. energies on comprehensive relationships with the big powers, particularly Russia and China,” but, in the same place in her text, she would also “renew strong and intimate relationships with allies” and “deal decisively with the threat of rogue regimes and hostile powers, which is increasingly taking the forms of the potential for terrorism and the development of weapons of mass destruction.”⁵ Later, she warns against ignoring “the role of values, particularly human rights and the promotion of democracy.”⁶

In a section titled “Setting Priorities,” Rice (rightly) criticizes the Clinton administration for deploying “the armed forces more often than at any time in the last 50 years,” multiplying “missions in the face of a continuing budget reduction.” And she appears to recognize that repairing “military readiness,” for whatever missions a future Republican president might require, will put (unspecified) pressures on the defense budget, though this might be mitigated by leveraging “technological advantages.”⁷

But what missions? Here, Rice, calling again for “focus,” specifies that “the American military must be able to meet decisively the emergence of any hostile military power in the Asia-Pacific region, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and Europe.” Having thus specified about 98 percent of the geopolitical world, she then cautions that “America’s military . . . must not be stretched or diverted into areas that weaken these broader responsibilities.”⁸ But even the remaining 2 percent, such as Kosovo, are reinstated, as a matter of “overriding strategic interest.” And even pure “humanitarian intervention’ cannot be ruled out a priori,” though she expects that such humanitarian intervention “should be, at best, exceedingly rare.”⁹ And finally—but not really finally, in this recitation of militarily compelling American interests—Rice stipulates

that “the door to NATO for the remaining states of eastern and central Europe should remain open” and cites the Chechnya war as “a reminder of the vulnerability of the small, new states around Russia and of America’s interest in their independence.”¹⁰

The above severe compression, of course, does not do justice to a subtle and savvy text. But we are talking about the operational demands that an ambitious “internationalist” policy places upon the nation’s military forces and defense budget, and the extensive exposure to high and even unmanageable danger that a virtually universal national strategy inflicts on our country.

Priorities are functionally meaningless. Foreign policy—particularly national strategy—does not run on priorities. It runs on “if-then” propositions that reflect commitments to intervene (whether formal or informal): If such and such event occurs in some place, we will intervene in a certain way with certain objectives. The question that matters, then, is, *What do we commit ourselves to defend?* So far, Gov. Bush’s advisers are almost totally blurred on this question. Given their own history when in power (most of them served in the Reagan or Bush administrations), they would intervene with military force in all the situations in which the Clinton administration has intervened or wanted to intervene, give or take a couple of strategically and budgetarily trivial cases. Governor Bush apparently wants to rule out U.S. military intervention in only two places, Haiti and Somalia.¹¹

In other words, both the real costs and the real consequences of verbal foreign policy formulations must be understood and accepted. If our politicians and their cadres of academic advisers don’t understand and accept them, the costs and consequences will be imposed on us anyway by objective conditions.

How Foreign Policy Is Made

In any proper “model” of the derivation of foreign policy, it is not “made” by a few authoritative elites—say, a president and his

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immediate official or unofficial advisers. Rather, it is derived in a complex process that has the “defense planning process” at its center but also involves a whole national society. If a country cannot, or will not, implement its foreign policy, that supposed policy is a mirage, or a bluff that is bound to be called by events that originate, not in our own minds or feelings, but in the large world outside.

The defense planning process is not—as asserted in a large body of populist thinking, reinforced by a large body of academic theorizing—a nonrational play of bureaucratic interests, say, of the military services. Nor is it a venal infusion of the greedy motives of the so-called military-industrial complex. Rather, the defense planning process is a recognizably rational sequence, translating the requisites of the nation’s foreign policy stance and its national strategy into military missions, force structures and weapons systems, and their associated costs and personnel requirements. If the nation (the national “political economy”) will not meet the costs—if, say, Congress denies the Army its force size or readiness or denies the Air Force its air-superiority planes or its stock of ground attack missiles—the effects will be felt somewhere up the “hierarchy of concerns,” perhaps in our inability to fulfill our commitment to an alliance, or in a deficient U.S. deployment to stop a regional aggression.

Other countries—allies and regional aggressors alike—will read these American deficiencies, sooner and more accurately than will our own politicians and defense academics, and will predict American defaults. Moreover, they will draw their own conclusions and act upon them. So this is one major point: Our foreign policies are not free; they have tangible requisites and inevitable consequences.

This is not, of course, to accuse a roster of foreign policy advisers ranging from George Shultz to Condoleezza Rice of not knowing how foreign policy is made. But, in one respect at least (along with the continuance of wide-ranging foreign policy goals—to “check,” as George W. Bush puts it, the

behavior of other countries), the Bush group does not differ much from the Clinton foreign policy group, notably Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Both groups are made up of people who have wielded American power as if there were a direct line between what they wanted to achieve in the world and what would actually happen.

Executive branch people, who have succeeded for most of their lives in vanquishing intrabureaucratic “competitors” (a term George W. Bush also uses to describe China), are not in the habit of imagining that they will be frustrated by sovereign foreign nations. Indeed, it is notable that the United States is the only power in the world whose political aspirants can presume to “make” foreign policy starting from the role they prefer that the United States play in the world.

Shifting Parameters in the International System

The ability even to contemplate such an approach is precisely what is changing. And this is the other major point: Sovereign foreign nations (whether “competitive” great powers, rogue nations, or even present allies) will increasingly challenge American designs and *increasingly deny America entry to their regions of the world*. In other words, while we “debate” about America’s “preferred” foreign policy, the world is evolving; the structure of the international system (mostly the configuration of power) is shifting, and with it America’s situation—its “geopolitical” situation, if you will. Therefore, it behooves us to look at how the structure of the international system is evolving before our analytic “eyes,” if we care to see what is really there. I call this “the handwriting on the wall.”^{1 2}

Ever since approximately the middle of the Cold War, America’s control over the behavior of even its own allies has been eroding. Examples include France’s de facto defection from the Atlantic alliance in the late 1960s and, more recently, the incomplete enforcement (to say the least) of the several

bans against Iraq; the casualties exacted on American forces in Somalia; the threats emanating from a potential peer competitor such as China; and the elusive North Korean development of nuclear weapons and long-range delivery vehicles.

This is not a handful of disparate events and circumstances. If one connects the dots—or, in the original image, deciphers the strange words written by the disembodied hand on the wall of the king’s banquet hall—one may discern a real prophecy, a true “parametric shift” in the structure of the international system. That shift is not reflected merely by the ubiquitous label “multipolarity”; rather, at the global level, it is a political disintegration (despite apparent economic “globalization”) far-reaching enough to constitute a truly structural change. It is leading to a system (almost a nonsystem) that I label “general unalignment.” Above all, this system is characterized by the regionalization of power, reflected most strikingly in the denial of extra-regional military intervention. That denial can occur either directly, because of regional adversaries’ capabilities and allies’ defections, or indirectly, as a result of a major power’s defense decisionmaking process in which different parameters of risks and costs will be reckoned.

Pertinent Lessons

In what one could call absolute technological terms, the U.S. military can destroy any target on earth (and, I would argue, that capability should be preserved). Nevertheless, several factors will have an effect on shaping our actual military forces, weapons systems, and operational doctrines:

1. Large-scale ground-force interventions will increasingly be interdicted by regional enemies’ capabilities to attack our forces, their ports and airfields of entry, and their logistical umbilical cords with weapons of mass destruction. Even much lesser means of war-

fare—ironically, perhaps *especially* such lesser means, called, in the military trade, “asymmetrical warfare” (such as urban guerrilla defense or rural guerrilla defense, both of which verge on sheer terrorism)—will discourage our occupation of territory and perhaps render our local facilities unusable. And those physical interdictions will be reinforced by American society’s sensitivity to casualties inflicted on our forces. Some of the same factors that discourage the insertion of large-scale ground forces into, and the lengthy occupation of, enemy territory indicate that, even if such intervention and occupation were attempted, it would not be thorough enough to wipe out sources of future hostility toward the United States (as did our post-World War II occupation of Germany and Japan). Indeed, occupation would be more likely to intensify hostility toward the United States. And a “Carthaginian” peace (plowing a whole country under) seems beyond America’s will to impose.

2. American military interventions will be increasingly deterred by the ability of regional enemies (and sympathetic fanatics) to project (through long-range and terroristic delivery) highly lethal munitions and agents directly into American society, and into the societies of American friends in the region. Those are, most often, of course, the same regional countries whose interests the United States is trying to maintain in the first place.
3. The ability of aggressors to hold regional states hostage has another obvious effect: those countries, effectively blackmailed, may deny overflight rights, or air bases, or ports, or logistical support, or any use of their territory to an intervening power; and they are unlikely to assist the intervenor by contributing their own forces. Instead, they are likely to opt

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conspicuously or surreptitiously for diplomatic accommodation or even strategic surrender. Such defection by America's own clients will further adversely tilt the cost/benefit curve of American military intervention, making it more expensive, arduous, time-consuming, and awkward to conduct our defense and offense (particularly an air-supported large-scale ground campaign). In fact, it may (absent some compelling vital American interest) cause us to wonder why we should intervene in the first place.

4. The combination of factors 1 (denial) and 3 (defection) argues for our concentration on developing and using what I call "strike warfare"—far offshore weapons platforms and intercontinental bases, very long-range projectiles and stealthy bombers, extremely precise homing guidance, and reliable real-time intelligence of the nature and occupancy of enemy facilities and the type and movement of enemy forces.
5. But factor 2 (enemy retaliation) must lead us to unleash even long-distance strike warfare very sparingly, probably only in response to an intolerable assault on American society, or perhaps to preempt a verified enemy countdown toward a delivery of lethal munitions or materials against American society. (The latter threat would also argue for the use of small-scale insertable commando units, with whatever aerial fire support and sustaining support they require.) We must do at least that; otherwise (in a hypothetical "zero retaliation" policy) the United States would lose its autonomy of action in world affairs.
6. Factor 2 must also impart impetus to America's quest for national strategic defenses, despite the opposing syndrome of formal international arms control agreements and deliberate

American self-denial of societal protection against air or space delivery of weapons.

7. Finally, however—and this is the bottom line for security policy—this country, although it retains the residue of its mid-20th-century power, *cannot expect too much* of its future exercise of strike warfare. That kind of warfare can destroy, it can punish, but it cannot change much politically or socially. And, on the other side of the ledger, our relative abstinence from military intervention may avoid some expressions of active hostility toward the United States.¹³ But, if the United States—or even individual American private citizens, groups, and organizations—is successful in operating candidly and forthrightly in the world, some potent pockets of hostility will remain.
8. The real issue is the prospects for American military intervention in the world. Unfortunately, there is no sign that any political aspirant of any of the prominent American parties will deal objectively and substantively with the prospective curtailment of American power. It is almost a footnote to observe and calculate that, if the United States were to adjust its foreign policy to its geopolitical circumstances, the appropriately noninterventionist military dispositions would save about \$100 billion a year from present and projected spending levels.¹⁴ The five-year saving of half a trillion dollars matches, almost precisely, the five-year revenue loss of George W. Bush's proposed \$438 billion tax cut, without diverting a problematic stream of future budget surpluses from their use in reducing the federal debt.¹⁵ This could be called making some virtue of necessity—the necessity, that is, of adjusting to a noninterventionist foreign policy.

“Isolationism” Redefined

There *will be*, predictively—there already is, impending—a *denial of American military intervention*, particularly with significant ground forces, in other regions of the world. And American society has already been reacting to the diminishing prospects for intervention. That reaction is what is being labeled, tendentiously, “isolationism.”

But attempts in current manipulative political rhetoric (or ambitious academic writings) to split the difference between the costs and risks of overinvolvement, on the one hand, and the opprobrium of failing to help other countries and peoples, on the other hand, do not produce a coherent, implementable foreign policy and national strategy. They are just noise.

The facile charge of “isolationism” is not only static that obscures the point; it misses the point. A good working definition of foreign policy is not what a president or a presidential candidate says that he or she would like to do in the world; it is more a prediction of what the whole country will be able to do in the international system of the future. One can, I suppose, call *that* “isolationism”; but, if it is, it is isolationism as the denial of intervention.

Notes

1. George W. Bush, Foreign policy speech at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, November 19, 1999; and Samuel M. (Sandy) Berger, Speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, October 2, 1999, White House Press Office, Press release. See also various statements by administration officials condemning the Republican Senate for defeating the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (commented on by Henry A. Kissinger, “Playing Politics with the Test Ban Treaty,” *Washington Post*, November 27, 1999).

2. George F. Kennan, *The Cloud of Danger* (Boston: Little, Brown/Atlantic Monthly Press, 1977); Robert W. Tucker, “The Purpose of American Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 60, no. 1 (Winter 1980–81): 241–74; Stanley Hoffmann, “The New Orthodoxy,” *New York Review of Books*, April 16,

1981, pp. 22–29; Stanley Hoffmann, “Foreign Policy: What’s to Be Done?” *New York Review of Books*, April 30, 1981, pp. 33–39; Ernst B. Haas, “On Hedging Our Bets: Selective Engagement with the Soviet Union,” in *Beyond Containment: Alternative American Policies toward the Soviet Union*, ed. Aaron Wildavsky (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1983), pp. 93–124; and Robert J. Art, “Geopolitics Updated: The Strategy of Selective Engagement,” *International Security* 23 no. 3 (Winter 1998–99): 79–113.

3. This logic is particularly applicable to our military planning. In Art’s strategic concept, for instance, the geographical categories of interest virtually imply a two-war stance (fighting one and at least deterring another). The retention of some “moralistic” categories of intervention (such as gross human rights violations) ensures multiple military engagements (despite a patina of “realism” that might be applied). The inclusion of some economic (“strangulation”-type) intervention scenarios contributes further to the proliferation of military missions.

The point is twofold: the broad categories of interest posited logically (albeit, of course, contingently) set up a series of “if-then” military missions by the United States (and “if-then” propositions constitute, in a good operational definition, “policy”); and those military missions must be prepared for, tangibly, in terms of forces, weapons, doctrines, and the requisite resources of money and personnel. The bottom line of any exercise in “selective engagement” is that the defense program will be virtually unchanged by the ministrations of any particular critic.

4. Condoleezza Rice, “Promoting the National Interest,” *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 1 (January–February 2000): 46.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 54, 60.

11. Terry M. Neal, “In TV Talk, Bush Draws Some Lines,” *Washington Post*, November 22, 1999.

12. See Earl C. Ravenal, “‘The Handwriting on the Wall’: The United States and the Impending Denial of Extra-Regional Intervention,” Paper delivered to the International Security Studies Section, International Studies Association, November 1999. The reference is to King

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Belshazzar's feast, described in the biblical Book of Daniel, chapter 5. The mysterious words on the wall, as interpreted by the prophet Daniel, said, "God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it."

13. See Ivan Eland, "Protecting the Homeland: The Best Defense Is to Give No Offense," Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 306, May 5, 1998.

14. See Earl C. Ravenal, "The 1998 Defense Budget," in Cato Institute, *Cato Handbook for Congress, 105th Congress* (Washington: Cato Institute, 1997), pp. 101-15, for the applicable methodology and illustration.

15. Eric Pianin and Terry M. Neal, "Bush to Offer \$483 Billion Tax-Cut Plan," *Washington Post*, December 1, 1999, p. 1.

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