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Democratizing Foreign Policy

Part III of IV: The Perils of Principles

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Don't stick to foolish consistencies. The times demand an ad hoc approach to foreign policy. *Full recommendations, page 4.*

Summary: Explicit principles of intervention risk creating false order and potential conflicts where none need exist. The United States should treat conflicts as discrete problems, assessing the appropriate means and likely results of its efforts on a case-by-case basis. It

should resist turning problems into principles and principles into contests of commitment. Doing otherwise threatens to transform local conflicts into global conflicts and entrap the United States in a series of avoidable military confrontations.

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IGCC is a multicampus research unit of the University of California, established in 1983 to conduct original research and inform public policy debate on the means of attenuating conflict and establishing cooperation in international relations. Policy Briefs provide recommendations based on the work of UC faculty and participants in institute programs. Authors' views are their own.

Creating Conflicts

In the wake of the Somalia disaster, a chorus of legislators demanded that President Clinton define the principles of his foreign policy. As our overtly humanitarian effort foundered on the rocks of local resistance, calls for explicit principles of intervention arose from many quarters. Such demands represent understandable pleas for conceptual order in a world of flux. Unhappy with domestically-driven policy chaos and emotional reactions to rapidly changing international events, the new foreign policy critics all want clarity in purpose and conduct. Ambiguity is the skewer upon which they hope to roast the president.

Yet, principles risk creating false order and potential conflicts where none need exist. Containment of Islamic fundamentalism or other “backlash” states, support for democracy, the defense of basic human rights, and other possible principles of American foreign policy are all designed to provide markers; seals of approval; to identify good guys and bad guys; distinguish friends from foes.¹ Even cooperative security, embodying the otherwise salubrious strategy of preventative diplomacy, is subtly premised on such distinctions, as one must know who and what to “prevent.”² Differentiating friends from foes clearly and accurately, however, is never an easy task. In the present era of rapid international change, it is even more difficult. And once made, distinctions between good and evil are self-reinforcing. American hostility will be returned, validating our initial assessment of the actor’s intentions, and sparking further actions to “protect” ourselves from the danger. Demarcating enemies—especially in the post-Cold War era—risks creating vicious circles of increasing hostility.

Some hostility is rooted in the inherent logic of international relations. Building a military apparatus to produce security for one’s own country tends to threaten others, creating an inescapable “security dilemma.” Yet, threats are a combination of capabilities, which can often be observed, and intentions, which cannot. States must always infer the intentions of others. Guessing wrong can render a state

¹ See Anthony Lake, “Confronting Backlash States,” *Foreign Affairs* 73, 2 (1994), pp. 45–55.

² Ashton B. Carter, William J. Perry, and John D. Steinbruner, *A New Concept of Cooperative Security* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1992).

vulnerable to unrecognized dangers. It can also needlessly make foes out of friends. Both types of incorrect inferences are errors that make the world a more dangerous place and undermine sound foreign policy. The fear of making the first error creates a conservative bias among states. This bias, in turn, increases the probability of committing the second error. Given America’s current predominance, however, creating unnecessary enemies may be the more consequential mistake in the long run. There are real dangers in the world, but we must be careful in drawing the lines of international cleavage.

Foreclosing Opportunities

While the collapse of the Soviet Union and success of America’s strategy of containment have obscured earlier “revisionist” views, a wide number of analysts have argued persuasively that the Cold War was not preordained but the product of mutual misperceptions of intentions. At the very least, America’s heightened concern with the Soviet threat after the war blinded it to possible peace-feelers extended by the Russians.³ These views should not be forgotten in the continuing euphoria over America’s “victory” over the Soviet giant. George Kennen’s telegram from Moscow, his subsequent *X* article in *Foreign Affairs*, and Paul Nitze’s NSC-68 all drew a stark and overly simplistic view of the Soviet threat. Our perception of Russian intentions was heavily colored by the recent experience with Nazi Germany, and thus the call to arms articulated by the Truman administration resonated widely with American public and elite opinion. The *principle* of containment that followed from this perception was easily understood, and served to rally support behind a

³ For a recent moderate view, see Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992). For “revisionist” approaches, see Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–1992*, 7th Ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993); Thomas J. McCormick, *America’s Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). For an excellent review of the Soviet side of this conflict and the possible but in any event ignored peace feelers, see R. Craig Nation, *Black Earth, Red Star: A History of Soviet Security Policy, 1917–1991* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

more assertive American foreign policy. Yet, by simplifying a complex world, the authors of the Cold War and containment demonized the Soviet Union, foreclosed other possible political orders, and possibly wasted thousands of American lives and trillions of dollars in defense expenditures.

Likewise, searching for simplifying principles today threatens to misconstrue the intentions of others and foreclose opportunities for the constructive management of complexity. This holds both for “clashes of civilizations” and political philosophies.⁴ In the longing for clarity, we may produce unnecessary enemies instead of friends, hostility rather than accommodation, and mutual resentment rather than respect. The world today is more complex than the one defined by our Cold War canon. We should recognize and accept this complexity rather than search for simple overarching principles that promise clarity but actually distort our vision.

Picking Principled Fights

The striking fact of most current international conflicts today is that they are limited in scope and produce relatively small spillovers for other states. The war of clans in Somalia, ethnic conflicts in Bosnia, and autocratic repression in Haiti were all local affairs. American interests were not directly involved. No American citizens were in danger. The economic prosperity of the United States was not at stake. Only the most far-fetched scenarios suggested that America’s security could be affected by these conflicts. The same holds true for most other great powers.

This was not always the case, of course. During the Cold War, the superpower rivalry tended to globalize local disputes. Any group or state in danger of losing position to a rival could appeal to a superpower for assistance. Knowing this, the likely winners of local conflicts were forced to appeal to the opposite superpower, lest outside support tip the scales against them. Fearful that the other would grant such assistance, each superpower was forced to honor the requests made to it. Through this competition, local conflicts rapidly became global conflicts. Like a black hole, the superpower contest inevitably drew other disputes into its orbit. Issues that truly concerned only the local parties escalated into tests of

superpower resolve—and occasionally threatened to escalate further into tests of nuclear capabilities.

Today, local conflicts risk becoming global conflicts not through superpower competition or the clash of vital interests, but through the application of broad principles of international rectitude. Sanctifying existing national borders, defending basic human needs, promoting democracy, or opposing genocide, however laudable in principle, all threaten to draw in states that would otherwise not be affected by the dispute. Enforcing principles of “correct” state behavior threatens once again to widen and amplify local conflicts.

Principles of international rectitude, of course, were incorporated in the United Nations Charter and subsequent international agreements, but they lay moribund during the Cold War. Today, they have been given new life. Few “interest-based” calls for American intervention in Bosnia were heard, for instance. Rationales that focused on escalating threats to the European order rang hollow. Rather, when America was called to intervene, we were told it was because various groups were carrying out policies of genocide, or we were bound to deter future ethnic slaughters. In the days leading up to the threatened invasion of Haiti, President Clinton did not argue that the United States must act to protect American lives, prosperity, or security. Rather, he called upon America to “restore democracy.”

In defending principles of appropriate international behavior, the United States risks being dragged into conflicts it might otherwise avoid—Bosnia and Haiti included. Principles raise the stakes of local conflicts and threaten escalation. Today, placing principles of international rectitude at the center of our foreign policy threatens to entrap the United States into a broad range of conflicts in which it has few direct interests. Demands for the consistent application of principles create expectations and precedents at home and abroad that threaten to “enlarge” American foreign policy far beyond its traditional limits—or even those envisioned by Anthony Lake in his September 1993 attempt to define the Clinton Administration’s foreign policy. Such demands may even stimulate new conflicts as oppressed or disaffected groups are emboldened to challenge the status quo. Principles can make the world a more dangerous rather than safer place.

⁴ See Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, 3 (1993), pp. 22–49.

Real Interests

This is not to argue against all foreign interventions. America does have real interests in many areas of the globe. Where American lives, economic well-being, or security are at risk, action must be taken. Sometimes situations will be so dire or threatening that we must be ready to pay all necessary costs. In other cases where the United States or others can bolster political and economic freedom at little cost, they should do so. However, in all circumstances the United States should treat conflicts as discrete problems, assessing the appropriate means and likely results of its efforts on a case-by-case basis. It should resist turning problems into principles and principles into contests of commitment. Doing otherwise threatens, once again, to transform local into global conflicts and entrap the United States into a series of avoidable military confrontations.

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How to avoid Transforming Local into Global Conflicts:

1. Take action only where American lives, economic well-being, or security are at risk.
2. Treat conflicts as discrete problems, assessing the appropriate means and likely results of efforts on a case-by-case basis.
3. Intervene where the United States or others can bolster political and economic freedom at little cost.
4. Don't pick fights. Resist turning problems into principles and principles into contests of commitment.

p.2: Guessing wrong can render a state vulnerable to unrecognized dangers. It can also needlessly make foes out of friends. Both types of incorrect inferences are errors that make the world a more dangerous place and undermine sound foreign policy.

p. 3: The striking fact of most current international conflicts today is that they are limited in scope and produce relatively small spillovers for other states. American interests are not directly involved. No American citizens are in danger. The economic prosperity of the United States is not at stake. Only the most far-fetched scenarios suggest that America's security can be affected by these conflicts.

p. 3: Demands for the consistent application of principles may even stimulate new conflicts as oppressed or disaffected groups are emboldened to challenge the status quo.

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