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Foundations of U.S. Stature and Security in the World

Winston Langley

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How may the stature and security of the United States, so passionately a concern for many and so profoundly important to the character and direction of our emerging global society, be pursued responsibly? This question is the burden of this article, in which the author examines and rejects a number of policy options to the challenges he sees Washington now facing. He rejects these policy options because he finds them miscast, incomplete, counterproductive, or representative of symptoms rather than causes. He suggests, instead, how the United States might advance its interests and the global interests and predicts a rather unwelcoming future for the United States—and the world—if Washington were to continue following the current extension of nineteenth- and twentieth-century “national security” practices.

All, all of a piece throughout
Thy chase had a beast in view;
Thy wars brought nothing about;
Thy lovers were all untrue.
'Tis well an old age is out,
And time to begin a new.

—John Dryden, “The Secular Masque”

We in the United States are again in the middle of an election cycle that will result in the selection of our next president, the principal architect of our foreign policy. As the leader of the most powerful country in the highly decentralized but rapidly rising, single global society, the next president will, for good or ill, have a most profound impact on the nature and direction of that society for decades to come as he or she pursues the stature and security of the United States in the world.

Issues, Problems, or Challenges

Advocates for the policy positions the United States should take are plentiful. One whose position fairly captures the dominant stances likely to be found in any literature review is Richard N. Haas, president of the Council on Foreign Relations. Haas spells out his position in the November–December 2014 issue of the journal *Foreign Affairs*.¹

Haas sees a disordered world expressed, first, through decades of conflict in the Middle East that resemble the Thirty Years’ War in seventeenth-century Europe (1618–1648). In his view, the communal and sectarian identities involved in this drawn-out fighting are the principal cause of the conflict. Second, he sees the “instability on the periphery of Europe” (the Ukraine) as

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having been caused by Russia's decision to give up "on the proposition of significant integration into the current European and global orders," electing instead to take an alternative course of action, including fomenting the crisis in Kiev. The third expression of the disorder is in Asia, where the potential for instability is centered on "robust identities, dynamic economies, rising military budgets, bitter historical memories, and unresolved territorial disputes."²

Haas adds the Korean conflict and a turbulent Pakistan to the concern about Asia. On a global level, he sees "cross-border flows of terrorists," viruses, greenhouse gas emissions (with inadequate institutional mechanism to deal with either of them), the rise of populism, and increasing inequality. Of the concerns, issues, and challenges expressive of disorder, none is of more weight to Haas than the declining superpower status of the United States and the absence of a likely successor "waiting to pick up the baton."

Likely Solutions or Recommended Policy Thrusts

Haas suggests that the United States forgo the policy of regime change in the Middle East (to create societies more like us) and accept the notion that getting people to accept liberal democracy is more difficult than is generally supposed. Complementing this approach should be efforts to promote civil society, help refugees, and counter "terrorism and militancy," sometimes with the application of force. With regard to Asia, he thinks priority ought to be given to the "pivot" or "rebalancing" strategy President Barack Obama is pursuing in East Asia (to contain China), including his efforts to gain domestic support for the proposed trans-Pacific trade agreement. This policy, the president hopes, will induce China to "reconsider" its behavior in several areas, such as its stance on certain disputed claims to islands in the South China Sea. With regard to Russia and the Ukrainian conflict, Haas proposes a mixture of efforts designed to "shore up" Ukraine economically and militarily, strengthen NATO, and impose sanctions on Russia (to which some "diplomatic exit" should be allowed, including assurances that the Ukraine will not be part of NATO any time soon), and lessen European dependency on Moscow's energy resources. At the global level, the United States should follow a policy of "integration," that is, try to bring other states into "arrangements to manage global challenges such as climate change, terrorism, proliferation, trade, public health, and maintaining a secure and open commons."³

Associated with these policy thrusts is Haas's urging that the United States put its "domestic house in order" so it can "increase Americans' living standards" and "generate the resources needed to sustain an active global role." "A stagnant and unequal society," he concludes, "will be unlikely to trust its government or favor robust efforts abroad."⁴

Examination of Challenges and Prescriptions

Haas's list of challenges is incomplete and miscast, and, in some instances, it represents symptoms rather than causes; and the suggested prescriptions are either inadequate or counterproductive.

At the incomplete level are the wholesale demographic changes that are taking place in the world, whether one looks at age levels (in Western Europe and Japan, for example, which are not even replacing their populations), the groups actively involved—including subversively—in politics, or those looking to public life, through the Internet or otherwise, for alternatives in which they can believe. Missing also is religion as an identity marker, as an inspiring mobilizer, and as a fighting rhetorical tool, among the weak, rather than simply a "communal" presence.

Missing, too, is the technology that permits networking within and across borders, and transnational links that are fast replacing international ones. To identify what is “taking place” in the Middle East as a contemporary expression of the Thirty Years’ War in Europe is to poorly understand the broader “movement for renewal” among Arabs (and within Islam) that began in the nineteenth century (some might say earlier) and to overlook European attitudes toward Jews—an attitude that also urged renewal (in the form of Zionism)—that predate the nineteenth century. One may note that all of Asia, including South, West, Central, and Southeast Asia, China, and Russia, are undergoing the struggle for renewal, as are Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, though less dramatically in some sites. This struggle must be understood as a long-term phenomenon, with different groups seeking to forge the content and direction of that renewal.

Nothing is said about the deep anger (not just mistrust—many groups historically have developed mistrust of government) that is widely shared among large numbers of people, including many in the United States, toward political leaders and political parties and their rhetoric and insincerity. And seeking to place Russia, the Arab countries, Islam in general, and China under “European and world orders” whose rules and processes have been shaped largely or created by the West and largely perceived by others as operating in the pursuit of the West’s interests is unlikely to work effectively—especially when many societies are seeking or undergoing renewal. People have different insights, histories, memories, experiences, orientations, belief systems, conceptual arrangements or structures, and justifications and explanations for the world they encounter and their condition of being. These cannot be dismissed or overlooked in seeking to shape policy.

The issue of “terrorism” and its transborder movement must be addressed, but one must look at this phenomenon through the eyes of those who feel marginalized and think that, to overcome confinement or to be on the margins, unrestrained physical coercion and violence is required and that the “authority” to use such force should be partially found in the moral, spiritual, and social weaknesses of those institutions against which the terror may be applied. In some instances (and here I would cite as an example the Thirty Years’ War), terrorism is used by the nation-state, whose very birth gave rise to its earned monopoly to use force to advance its interest. Nuclear weapons are terror weapons, which the state claims a right to use; it is not by accident that the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) seeks and claims the status of a state. Force alone or the use of mostly force is not the answer here, since one “terrorist group” will be replaced by another, perhaps with successors even more fearsome.

The prescriptions for each of the other issues Haas identifies fare no better. Giving economic aid to the Ukraine (a victim of balance-of-power politics), increasing sanctions on Russia, and strengthening NATO; supporting the trans-Pacific “pivot”; increasing military spending, in the aggregate and in specific areas of concerns previously mentioned—all are flawed. How does increasing sanctions against Russia help the United States in its need of Russia to help solve the crisis in Syria, settle matters with Iran, and improve conditions in the Ukraine, the economy of which has important links to Russia and the areas of the Ukraine under the control of groups loyal to Russia? How does strengthening NATO and further embarrassing Russia (and we might not have acted differently had we lost the Cold War and Russia were extending Warsaw Pact troops near Mexico) provide confidence-building in the tackling of problems throughout the world? We will touch on one other—military spending.

The United States is the largest seller of weapons to other countries—some of these sales end up with nonstate groups. There are estimates that the wars in Iraq and Iran could cost the

United States over \$4 trillion; and we currently have a military budget that is the highest in our history—over \$637 billion (not including military-related expenditures, such as veterans affairs; pensions to military retirees; intelligence-gathering spending by NASA; nuclear weapons research, maintenance, cleanup, and production; and interest on the debt incurred in past wars). What is even more telling, over 53 percent of all discretionary spending (for which funds are not already committed) goes to military spending. And yet, the problems of the world have not become more manageable, because using force as the solution to human problems has never really worked.⁵

And where will all the funds come from to support education, build infrastructure, generate employment at income levels that produce the taxes needed for the military and economic activities incident to all the political confrontations that are being urged? What happens to the moral and social climate in the United States and the world?

Despite recognizing a number of global problems, Haas says nothing about the world financial system and the dysfunction and corruption associated with it, nothing about the process by which wealth and income are progressively being transferred to fewer and fewer persons or groups of people. We merely see reference to the poor and poverty. The lack of civic responsibility on the part of most transnational corporations, an economic system that seeks profits at the expense of everything else, including the environment and society, the dominant political ideology (nationalism) that will sacrifice everything to national security, including its own citizens, and even the destruction of the world—the implications of nuclear weapons are unmentioned. There is no mention of the United Nations.

It is understandable that the United Nations and other like institutions should go unmentioned: they are assumed, unchanged, to be a likely part of any future order. This means we are approaching the future with the tools of the past, and yet we seem to expect different results. There is no historical evidence that this form of thinking ever succeeds.

What Is to Be Done?

The substance of the proposals Haas presents (and his descriptive identities of the issues and challenges) suggests a commitment to the old balance-of-power real politics, with its focus on exclusion, vulnerability to foes—actual and potential—coercive punishment or threat of that punishment, and blindness to the dynamics of power, including the culture of violence it cultivates. Underlying much of this thinking is the United States' global leadership.

The United States should aim for the very opposite: inclusion, mutual security, cultural empathy, and nonviolent resolution of conflict, de-emphasizing nationalism and the old notions of balance of power. Let us touch on each of these.

The focus of balance-of-power politics on exclusion springs from its concern with security, which is grounded in the nation-state, the only sovereign institution we have. The state is supreme, and thus, all international or transnational authority is decentralized and subject to the claims of the state. Since each state is legally and morally equal and has equal claims to the need for security, which is seen as resulting from national power, a zero-sum game mentality develops—the power one gains is what another loses. If China becomes more powerful, the United States is becoming less so. If NATO gains greater influence in the Ukraine, Russia is losing influence and power there; hence, Russia's reaction to the actual or perceived conduct of the West, led by the United States, toward the Ukraine. Balance-of-power politics is also an explanation for the United States' response to different alignments of states and political groupings in the Middle East and our forming of a ring of alliances around China, the Pacific

“pivot,” including a trans-Pacific trade bloc that does exclude China. Exclusion extends to who is a citizen, whose loyalty is sought and recognized, who is an ally, who has access to intellectual property, who gets to be a special trade partner, what types of weapons can be had, whose identity is or becomes part of a sentimental ideal, and who may be members of a “galaxy of groups.”

The dynamics of power makes things worse. As China observes the United States becoming more powerful (militarily, for example), it feels it too must increase military spending, which will make Japan and Russia nervous, as Israel is nervous about Iran’s gaining nuclear weapons, though Israel has those weapons. And what of Saudi Arabia and Egypt with respect to Iran’s claim to nuclear capabilities? They want to have like capabilities, unless the United States sells them more “superior weapons.” Having superior coercive capability (something that terrorized the world during the nuclear arms race between the West and the Soviet bloc) is an effort to make the “enemy”—meaning peoples and societies—vulnerable, while making oneself relatively invulnerable. Where one state or group of states has the resources to match that of another in developing coercive capabilities, a condition of “mutual vulnerability or mutual assured destruction” results, as was experienced during the Cold War.

By amassing superior power a state will seek to reserve to itself (hence a reluctance to use international bodies like the United Nations) the right to punish those who act contrary to its interest or to threaten them with punishment. Such a state, or group of states, that enjoys this type of power frequently uses itself and its social and political culture as its principal or even sole frame of reference, because it tends to feel superior, by virtue of its superior power. So, for a long time, we have had “exceptionalism”: Athenian, Persian, Roman, British, French, German, American, Russian, and Western. As with all dominant countries and cultures throughout history, the sense of exceptionalism is accompanied by a lack of empathy for the other. It is hard for the West, for example, to understand the struggle or search for renewal among much of the non-West, even though the West has gone through many an effort at renewal in its own history. We have already noted the limited efficacy of the use of force, and Afghanistan reinforces this lesson. So, in keeping with the suggestions at the beginning of this section, the United States—under its next president—should aim, using its own history of renewal after the Civil War and during the John F. Kennedy–Martin Luther King and the modern women’s movements, to reorient its foreign policy.

That reorientation should begin with the principle of inclusion, offering as a priority, security for all—not only those under NATO or the Rio Treaty but all human beings—by helping to set up a mechanism that will bring to bear the collective presence of all nations in the security of each. The United States is in a position to lead in this endeavor if for no other reason than that it has a military force that outdistances, by far, those of other states and expenditures for which are greater than the combined amounts of all major powers, but also because Washington and its allies account for more than two-thirds of all military spending. Inclusion might be accomplished by either a full implementation of Article 47 of the U.N. Charter (which deals with the Military Staff Committee), along with a reform of the Security Council, or a broader reform under Article 109 of the charter. From such a course of action, one could more effectively employ nonviolent modes of conflict resolution, accompanied by appropriate levels of disarmament at the national level, focus on dealing with the division of Korea, whose people—North and South—have long suffered, and, likewise, address the issues of the Middle East and South Sudan, among others.

Inclusion also would entail reshaping the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations and working with a reformed International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to encourage greater transparency and to address the structural issues involved in world economic transactions that involve the social cooperation of many, many people but that unfortunately occasion an income and wealth distribution to fewer and fewer. The simultaneous progressive implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights with incentives to support a corporate culture that does not focus exclusively on returns to shareholders but considers returns to employees, consumers, and communities as well should be pursued; and the long-debated Tobin tax of a cent on each international economic transaction to finance the United Nations should be endorsed and pushed.

Coupled with the preceding economic and military changes should be a focus on the urbanization of the world, the relationship of urban areas to rural areas, the existing and future built and natural environment, the degradation of natural systems, the life of the planet itself, and the moral and stewardship responsibilities each person and group owes to all biotic communities. We need as well a new emphasis on human development (not European, American, African, or Southeast Asian) within the context of the elementary moral and legal principles imbedded in the International Bill of Human Rights. That bill recognizes that everyone is entitled “to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this [Universal] Declaration [of Human Rights] is fully realized.”⁶ This important policy orientation could help bring into being a special counterhegemonic, inclusive order (unlike earlier others) that focuses on all humans.

Linked to this focus would be a new emphasis on education, including a new press that would, under Article 19 of the International Bill of Human Rights, help each person to understand and enjoy the right “to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” That education would also be defined by collaboration with the rest of the world to look at world history without an “inner gaze toward” the deployment of that history to further the claimed uniqueness of those groups that seek to subjugate the least socially favored and support domination. Out of such a study (with all the accompanying curricular reforms) the human capacity for empathy will further unfold, especially if one were to link the effort in education to discoveries about each other’s ways and condition of being, and to the education and training of children and youth. For such education and training, the United States would work with the United Nations and its members to implement the 1965 U.N. Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect, and Understanding between Peoples with travel, exchanges, tourism, meetings, the study of foreign languages, the twinning of towns and universities, and a problem-solving approaches to learning. They (the young people) should be part of a world youth movement, dedicated to help build the future that they will be called on to lead, through

- a deepened understanding of the challenges facing humankind, opportunities to explore their causes and instill the shared hope and confidence that such challenges, being of human origin, are amenable to human solutions;
- identifying the early signs of impending global problems in local phenomena, developing sensitivity to such signs, and empowering people to take concerted action; and
- fostering empathetic imagination and a keen awareness that actions that benefit one’s own country might have a negative impact on or might be perceived as a threat by other countries, elevating this to a shared pledge not to seek one’s happiness and prosperity at the expense of others.⁷

Finally, the United States should argue for a certain physiosocial and legal infrastructure. In the first, the largest portion of the savings realized from the new military circumstances of the world—the collective defense for each and all states will result in immense savings for each country—should be used to repair, build, improve, redirect, or elaborate the physical infrastructure of countries. That course of action would benefit everyone, especially if it is undertaken in a manner that is consistent with sustainability. Soldiers or former soldiers might be able to help in this repairing, building, improving, redirecting, and elaborating; so, too, would the youth of the world.

The network of social support to children and the elderly, as well as to the disabled and otherwise needy, should never be withdrawn and should be augmented where possible. The social infrastructures that make this support actual should be strengthened.

Of equal importance must be our attention to the emerging legal infrastructure that deals with human rights, the world's oceans, and the criminal conduct of states and their leaders. The area of criminal conduct is governed by the recently created International Criminal Court. This court, properly developed and administered, can be a most important institution in getting states and their leaders, in general (not only those from Africa), to act in a manner that comports with international law, including laws dealing with torture, genocide, aggression, and human trafficking. Tertiary education, including that done by law schools, should focus on human rights and human rights law, so that professors, students, judges, prosecutors, police, caregivers, and citizens at large are fully apprised of their importance and our mutual moral and legal responsibilities. And, with regard to the world's oceans, the International Seabed Authority should be supported, to ensure a more orderly way of dealing with over two-thirds of the earth's surface by shaping practices that can help us better respond to the concerns of the world's commons.

Together, the proposals mentioned in this section could begin to help the world deal with the fear, anger, mistrust, bitterness, and progressive marginalization of even the most sacred of values—the wholesale spying on people, including citizens by countries that consider themselves democratic, the killing of citizens living abroad, without the due process of law, and the beheading of individuals to create fear and shock. Perhaps they may even inspire individual and collective hope.

Given the tone and content of recent debates by presidential candidates, these proposals might be seen as coming from someone who is tone-deaf. We are, however, at a crossroads in international relations that gives us another chance for renewal, including an opportunity to resolve a dilemma that Albert Camus comments on eloquently in his work *The Rebel*. He notes that those in favor of war—even the most enlightened—claim that if direct, organized violence is necessary, it is inexcusable. They not have sought to resolve the dilemma, however, by seeking to build conditions that will make violence unnecessary. They have preferred instead to ignore the inexcusable component of the dilemma or have continued to console themselves in the name of history (national security, for example, civilization, the purportedly degraded enemies) to add murder to murder until what remains is nothing but a continuous violation of everything in human beings that protests against injustice and the undermining of human dignity. We have an opportunity, with the lead of the United States, to help deal with this dilemma and many of its associated circumstances.

The alternative is to have the United States extend itself, as implicitly urged by Haas, into what Arnold Toynbee called “a universal state,” one that will, egged on by patriots (“lovers”), become exhausted from “obligations in every corner of the globe,” destroying its immense

promise and coming to resemble the site of T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, which was fruitful and now is not, where life was rich, varied, beautiful, organized, and even lofty, despite weaknesses and has now morphed into something dragging itself out in a poverty-stricken, drug-dependent, and disrupted and ugly tedium, without health, and no consolation of morality.⁸

This country does not merit such a fate and, to the extent that its stature and security are imbedded in the common security of humankind, it will be affirming its loftiest values and ensuring its indefinite richness, vigor, and youth.

Notes

¹ Richard N. Haas, "The Unraveling: How to Respond to a Disordered World," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 6 (November/December 2014): 70–79

² *Ibid.*, 71

³ *Ibid.*, 78

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Anup Shah, "World Military Spending," *Global Issues*, last updated June 30, 2013, <http://www.globalissues.org/article/75/world-military-spending>. Very important information is to be garnered here.

⁶ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 28. The International Bill of Human Rights is made up of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

⁷ See Daisaku Ikeda, *Value Creation for Global Change: Building Resilient and Sustainable Societies*, 2014 Peace Proposal, January 26, 2014, 12, https://www.sgi-usa.org/newsandevents/docs/Ikeda_Peace_Proposal_2014.pdf.

⁸ Richard Kreitner, "September 26, 1888: T.S. Eliot Is Born," *The Nation*, September 26, 2015, 25.