PART ONE
Getting our
House in
Order
CAN WE REBUILD A NATIONAL SECURITY CONSENSUS?

Kathleen H. Hicks

American foreign policy is at a crossroads. The nation is fiscally challenged, politically polarized, frustrated by 10 years of conflict, and confronting relative decline—a daunting set of conditions in which to establish a foreign affairs agenda. Successfully navigating the shifting domestic and international landscape at this crossroads will be critical to securing U.S. interests. Reviving a consensus on how to do so is almost as important.

The prospect of U.S. military intervention in Syria has highlighted the fragility of our long-standing national security consensus. When our nation is deeply fragmented, we are prone to strategic drift, as happened during the Vietnam War. In contrast, a shared vision for U.S. national security across a core, bipartisan cross-section of the American public and their elected officials enables us to be agile and purposeful, as it did immediately after World War II. A U.S. foreign policy consensus is also important to the friends and allies it helps to assure and to those whom it helps to credibly deter.

Consensus, however, will not be easy.

CHALLENGES TO CONSENSUS

Strengthening the consensus on the U.S. role in the world requires the nation to address at least four interwoven challenges. First, most Americans are understandably concerned foremost with solving problems at home. Education, infrastructure, health care, and the economy are issues of primary importance to many American families. The past 10
years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan and the lack of an urgent, existential threat to the United States have compounded this desire to look inward. It is unsurprising that in a 2012 Pew Research poll, 83 percent of respondents agreed that we should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems at home, up from 73 percent in 2002.¹

Second, resources are scarce. The U.S. economy is still recovering and entitlement spending is consuming an increasing proportion of the federal budget. Fewer dollars are now available for defense, diplomacy, and development—indeed, for any discretionary spending. The effects of these fiscal constraints go beyond the reduction in our ability to execute a given security strategy. They also increase the scrutiny over the strategic choices themselves. Should the United States try to improve its domestic infrastructure (currently graded a D+ by the American Society of Engineers), ensure its military can defeat any potential future adversary (a difficult and costly goal), and/or increase security at U.S. borders? How should we pay for what we want: raise tax rates, cut entitlements, reduce military benefits? Winston Churchill best captured the sentiment for our times with his famous quip: “Gentlemen, we have run out of money. Now we have to think.”

A third challenge to consensus is a deepening division in American culture over the appropriate balance between privacy and security. On the left and right, the government is suffering from a trust deficit in its handling of information and technology. In the center, there is disgust over the very leaks that have fueled the distrust. Such divisions are longstanding in American history, but in the information and unmanned age, they are likely to multiply. Left unresolved, these threats to the public’s trust in U.S. foreign and security policies will constrain the president and Congress by creating confusion over fundamental principles regarding the role and limits of government.

Finally, perhaps the greatest challenge to a shared vision of the U.S. role in the world

is the disintegration of bipartisanship. This disintegration reflects the factors cited above and many others beyond this author’s scope. Bipartisanship has long been strongest in the national security arena. This owes in part to sustained levels of public support for an active U.S. role on the world stage, which paradoxically remains at levels on par with the public’s desire to focus more at home. Yet as the chasm between political parties widens on other issues, agreement on national security matters suffers in the wake.

BUILDING A SECURITY CONSENSUS

Though the above challenges to consensus are perhaps obvious, their resolution is not. The United States is at an important crossroads in its foreign policy. With two years until the next presidential election, 2014 is a propitious time to begin a public discussion on the key principles, interests, and approaches that should guide American security policy. Some of the key questions to address include:

• What are our nation’s interests in the world, and what relative value do we assign to each of those interests?
• Does the United States need to be a leader in the world to secure those interests? What does it mean to lead in a period of austerity?
• What domestic investments and choices are critical for making the United States stronger abroad?
• What costs and risks is the United States willing to bear in its rebalance to Asia? The fight against al Qaeda and its affiliates? Preventing Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons?
• Where can investments in development and diplomacy offset more costly investments in defense? Where can private industry assist and what efforts are inherently the federal government’s to pursue?
• How can we be more effective in working with our allies and partners across the globe? What must the United States be prepared to do alone and what should others provide in support of common interests?
• What principles should guide leaders in balancing the need for improved security with the rights of American citizens?

These issues must be weighed and discussed by citizens across the nation. We will not achieve the needed foreign policy consensus through an insular debate inside of Washington, D.C. Although a public dialogue alone is unlikely to overcome the challenges to consensus, it is a necessary step in forging a coherent and convincing narrative for America’s desired role in the world. Armed with a common understanding of our purpose and principles, the United States will be positioned to forge a national security approach that sustains the kind of active role in the world that most Americans seek.

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2. Ibid. In 2012, 83 percent of respondents agreed that it is best for the future of the United States for it to be active in world affairs.
THE SNOWDEN EFFECT: CAN WE UNDO THE DAMAGE TO AMERICAN POWER?

James A. Lewis

Political scientists and military strategists have tried to define a new grand strategy for America since the end of the Cold War. Despite repeated efforts, the results have not been compelling, perhaps because they start from the wrong premise about America’s continued global role. The chaotic global politic situation we face now, with clashing values and interests, is not the same as a military threat to freedom from hostile totalitarian regimes against whom we could lead and defend. In the current situation, we are just another contender for power, one whose ideas, no matter how exceptional, are often greeted with suspicions that Edward Snowden’s leaks have only reinforced.
The damage done by the leaks to intelligence collection will be short lived, but the damage to American influence could easily endure. The leaks have done more harm than we recognize. Snowden is the latest in a long line of American naïfs—gullible, self-righteous, with a dislike for America that blinds them to the world’s larger dangers. Like the unfortunate Bradley Manning, Snowden was exploited by those whose intent is to damage American influence and power. We are used to applauding those who use the internet against authoritarian regimes, but the tool has now been turned against democracies. Individuals who use the global internet for political effect are a new and potent force in international politics, and the internet lets them reach an expanded audience for a counter-narrative that casts American action in the harsh light of self-interest.

The United States is unique in defining its self-interest as best served by promoting a stable international order based on the rule of law, open and equitable arrangements for trade, and a commitment to democratic government and human rights. Its record is not perfect, but is better than any other nation in pursuing such ideals. But most nations now believe that legitimacy in international affairs comes from the United Nations, not from an inherited exceptionalism. The reaction to the leaks shows that much of the world questions exceptionalism as a justification for our actions.

American exceptionalism is a historical artifact from a world that no longer exists. Seventy years ago, the United States led an alliance of democracies to defeat fascism. Twenty-five years ago, with the same Western alliance, it overcame a massive totalitarian regime. But most of the world’s population was not alive for these events and they find them unpersuasive in explaining that we are not just another great power or hegemon pursuing narrow self-interest. The invocation of the right of self-defense is unpersuasive because most nations believe self-defense is only justified when a nation’s territorial integrity or political independence is threatened, and the United States faces no such threat. Elites in countries as disparate as Germany and Brazil question American conduct as contrary to the norms of state behavior. The disparity between America’s historic message and its current actions, and the ambiguous nature of conflict today where good and evil are not clearly demarcated, undercuts legitimacy and influence.

This is not an argument about whether American actions since 2003 were necessary or correct. What counts for a new grand strategy is how they are perceived by others and how this perception affects American power. When Brazil’s president tells the UN General Assembly that Snowden’s revelations “caused indignation and repudiation in public opinion around the world,” and were “a breach of international law and an affront to the principles that must guide relations among [states],” she reflects a growing unwillingness to accept American leadership.

Brazil takes a conservative approach to international relations that reflects narrowly defined interests. If Brazil itself is not directly threatened, it takes no action. The chief purpose of international relations is commercial benefit or, for larger powers, to assert regional dominance. These concepts could describe American foreign policy in the nineteenth century and probably still guide the foreign policy of many countries. But in Brazil and elsewhere, there is also a reactive element, stimulated by discomfort with the unipolar moment and the perceived excesses of the war on terror. Becoming the sole global power
produced antibodies to American authority and created a concern in many countries that no single state, no matter how pure its motives, should dominate world affairs.

This concern damages both the credibility and the legitimacy of America’s leadership. The situation resembles the post-Vietnam era. Like then, there is an element of lost respect — the 10-year adventure in Iraq and Afghanistan did not enhance the credibility of American power or ideas. There is a strong reaction to abuses both perceived and real (often by those already disposed to be hostile). But after Vietnam, democratic nations still faced a common opponent, and needed American leadership for collective defense. This helped the United States regain leadership and influence. That is not the case today. Moreover, America’s domestic political crisis can make our exceptionalism something to avoid rather than admire - government shutdowns and budget impasses do not inspire confidence abroad. The state of world affairs does not favor a return to global influence as easily as it did thirty years ago.

The unipolar moment is long gone but the contest for democracy that appeared to end with the Soviets’ demise is not over. There are direct challenges to the principles and institutions created after 1945, from the crumpling of the World Trade Organization to the questioning of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In this new struggle of ideas we face an agile and diffuse set of opponents. They believe or at least they use with great effect the argument that America is an empire and that the motive behind its global presence is to preserve control. This counter-narrative to exceptionalism has won broad acceptance; the leaks reinforce it even though the ultimate effect of the leaks is to strengthen authoritarianism and injure human rights.

We are again in a contest of ideas and values. It is not a military contest. A new grand strategy cannot rely on military preeminence, since force and coercion are counterproductive when pursuing political goals that require winning agreement from nations with whom we are unlikely to ever find ourselves at war. Nor can defeating terrorism serve as an organizing principle. While only the United States has the means or the ideas to pursue a world ruled by law rather than force, being irreplaceable does not guarantee leadership, particularly when we face a skeptical global audience that includes powerful nations eager to challenge American ideas on how international relations should work and ready to assert regional authority against the global power.

One response to the leaks would be to wait, do nothing, and hope that the Snowden effect will simply go away. But inaction guarantees damage. An apology would be ludicrous, given the behavior of other countries. A recitation of slogans is inadequate. The best response to the leaks and those who trumpet them is that the justification for our actions is not exceptionalism (or hegemony) but the continued pursuit of peaceful international relations based on the beliefs that have shaped American policy since it became a global power. A world in which America is less capable or steps back will be neither pleasant nor safe (a point that escapes both European leftists and Congressional isolationists). The applause that greeted the leaks from a not overly astute audience obscures this danger. The Snowden effect is a warning of how our influence has been damaged — and provides an opportunity to rebuild it.