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*Return to Realism: American Leadership Based on Core Interests*

In one of the standard handbooks of American foreign policy, *Foreign Affairs Strategy*, Dr. Terry L. Deibel puts forward that any American purpose must at a minimum include, in order of priority, “Physical Security, Economic Prosperity, Value Preservation at Home, and Value Projection Overseas.”<sup>1</sup> This list includes the core American interests that most administrations have attempted to pursue, in one way or another, since the founding of the United States with the last interest being added permanently roughly after World War II. The purpose of America’s international leadership is to defend and advance these interests while doing so in a constructive, pragmatic way. One of the main domestic dangers facing this purpose is the ideology of neoconservatism, the policies of which often results in costly overextension through the shortsighted overuse of hard power. Before this concern is examined, however, first the suggested core American interests must be explained.

At first glance, the core interest list presented may appear as too fundamental and narrow a strategic vision for the very complex, interconnected, and often chaotic contemporary world the United States inhabits. This concern is understandable, but this list was deliberately chosen as both a guide upon which to base policy and a means of preventing strategic overthink. Listing the minimum core national interests the purpose of American leadership is rooted in is important because these pillars serve as a standard that all policies and decisions should be held to. For instance, a report by the Institute for National Strategic Studies and National Defense University stated, “[A]ddressing this [international] environment in fact aligns comfortably with American

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<sup>1</sup> Terry L. Deibel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy: Logic for American Statecraft* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 126–134.

grand strategy over time. Broadly speaking, U.S. vital or core interests remain remarkably consistent... That said, we must beware of attempts to define everything in terms of national security. Any discussion of grand strategy quickly loses coherence and utility when we do.”<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, if an action does not promote one or more of the core interests, or is even detrimental to them, then that action ought to be discarded. This is especially so in regards to the non-negotiable need for physical security and the economic prosperity that provides the means to maintain hard power. In addition, there exists the fact that while there may be debate over the means, there is agreement that those core interests constitute the minimum national ends. This occurs whether from a conservative organization such as the American Enterprise Institute in their book *The Imperative of American Leadership*,<sup>3</sup> or in a liberal organization’s book such as the Brookings Institute’s *Still Ours to Lead*.<sup>4</sup> Such a consensus is also reflected in the work of nonpartisan institutions as well including the RAND Corporation’s report *Choices for America in a Turbulent World*<sup>5</sup> and the Center for International Strategic Studies’ *Global Flashpoints 2015*.<sup>6</sup> Thus although those four enduring interests are basic, they are the bedrock purpose on which American leadership in the international system all foreign policy decisions stem from and support.

One of the main difficulties in planning and executing American leadership in a purposeful manner comes from domestic ideological debates. Part of this stems from domestic

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<sup>2</sup> R. D. Hooker Jr., “The Grand Strategy of the United States” (Washington, D.C., 2014), 14, <http://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/grand-strategy-us.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Muravchik, “The Imperative of American Leadership,” *American Enterprise Institute*, 1996, <https://www.aei.org/publication/the-imperative-of-american-leadership/>.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Jones, “Still Ours To Lead,” *Brookings*, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/books/2013/still-ours-to-lead>.

<sup>5</sup> RAND Corporation, “Choices for America in a Turbulent World: Strategic Rethink,” 2015, [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1114.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1114.html).

<sup>6</sup> Center for International Strategic Studies, *Global Flashpoints 2015: Crisis and Opportunity*, ed. Josiane Cohen, Craig Gabel (Washington, D.C.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), vii–xi, [http://csis.org/files/publication/150220\\_Cohen\\_GlobalFlashpoints\\_Web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/150220_Cohen_GlobalFlashpoints_Web.pdf).

opposition to the realist school and its perceived cold methods of conducting foreign affairs, including the maintenance and occasional use of a large defense establishment. Although this group is relatively small, they are also vocal, with one example including work by libertarian scholars at the CATO Institute. In one of their books, some of these writers have asserted, despite the lessons of human history, that “The era of potential hegemons has passed: no state is going to conquer a region and turn it against the Western Hemisphere... Hitler and Stalin still serve as the backdrop to American grand strategy, yet we will never see their likes again. Such threats as do exist from nation-states, Washington brings on itself.”<sup>7</sup> Yet concerning as such naivety might be, arguably the greater ideological threat to a pragmatic U.S. leadership that serves American core interests is instead the continued influence of neoconservatism.

Any consideration of American purpose must account for not only for enduring national interests but also the tools, capacity, and resources available with which to secure and maintain those foundational pillars of American foreign policy.<sup>8</sup> A long-term, sober, and comprehensive approach is needed to maintain any coherent policy and to succeed geopolitically,<sup>9</sup> and it is exactly this approach that is lacking in neoconservatism. Indeed, this has been a problem since the first emergence of the neoconservative movement during the Nixon Presidency. As Dr. Henry Kissinger remarked during his interview with *The National Interest*, “We sought a position to be ready to use force when necessary but always in the context of making it clearly demonstrable as a last resort. The neoconservatives took a more absolutist view... [Thus] [t]he trouble with America’s wars since the end of the Second World War has been the failure to relate

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<sup>7</sup> CATO Institute, *A Dangerous World? Threat Perception and U.S. National Security*, ed. Christopher A. Preble and John Mueller (Washington, D.C.: CATO Institute, 2014), 262.

<sup>8</sup> Deibel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy: Logic for American Statecraft*, 13–23.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

strategy to what is possible domestically. The five wars we've fought since the end of World War II were all started with great enthusiasm. But the hawks did not prevail at the end.”<sup>10</sup>

This danger of overextension, generally unproductive saber-rattling, and a willingness to expend blood and treasure on risky propositions such as democracy promotion and nation building, are all hallmarks of neoconservatism as an ideology.<sup>11</sup> These aspects of ideology over practicality can even be seen in the most recent Presidential debates. Some pundits and candidates have made hawkish calls not to talk to Russia,<sup>12</sup> to incorporate Ukraine into NATO,<sup>13</sup> and even to fight Russia if necessary to impose a no-fly zone in Syria.<sup>14</sup> All of these are examples of policies that, if carried out, would gain America little and would be disastrous for the four core national interests. Needless to say, casual talk of confrontation with a nuclear armed power, especially over the geopolitical fate of a non-treaty ally, is not something to be taken lightly, nor is the expenditure of precious resources and lives without a clear plan and end goal.

As previously mentioned, there is general agreement on the need to uphold the four principles and the idea that American leadership should be geared towards those ends. In a world in which potential conflict zones are many and America is the only country with the capacity to act, policies must be prudent and farsighted. A brief overview of history is instructive in this task. Statesmen and women who understand the need to negotiate, and to balance hard and soft

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<sup>10</sup> Jacob Heilbrunn, “The Interview: Henry Kissinger,” *The National Interest* (Washington, D.C., August 2015), <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-interview-henry-kissinger-13615>.

<sup>11</sup> RAND Corporation, “Choices for America in a Turbulent World: Strategic Rethink,” 3–4.

<sup>12</sup> Tom S. Elliott, “Fiorina: I Wouldn't Talk to Russia, I'd Rebuild Missile Defense in Poland,” *The National Review*, 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/424143/fiorina-i-wouldnt-talk-russia-id-rebuild-missile-defense-poland-tom-s-elliott>.

<sup>13</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, “Marco Rubio's Foreign Policy Vision,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/united-states/marco-rubios-foreign-policy-vision/p36511>.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Grier, “Clinton and Fiorina Push No-Fly Zone for Syria. Really?,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2015, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/Decoder/2015/1002/Clinton-and-Fiorina-push-no-fly-zone-for-Syria.-Really>.

power in addition to deterrence and restraint, are the ones who succeed in bringing out circumstances the most favorable to them. At the risk of simplifying the many causes of conflicts, it can at least be said that a lack of communication and restraint contributed greatly to World War I, whereas vehemence at Versailles and later timidity at Munich contributed greatly to World War II. In another example, the Cuban Missile Crisis wasn't solved by either capitulating to a Russian nuclear presence on the island or by invading Cuba either. It was resolved through firm, but measured, deterrence and back channel negotiation.

Likewise in today's world, conflicts will not be prevented or resolved to the benefit of enduring American interests if the U.S. only resorts to the sword or stands completely aloof from geopolitical areas of major importance. One example might be the case of Ukraine, where although Putin must absolutely be deterred from repeating his hybrid warfare in the Baltics, for all intents and purposes without armed intervention (and a heightened possibility of war), it must be recognized that Donetsk and Crimea are de facto lost to Russia. Demanding that Putin return Crimea in exchange for sanctions relief ignores the fact that Ukraine will always be more important to Russia than America and therefore worth a higher price to Moscow.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, such demands prevent the possibility of settling the conflict with Ukraine as a neutral zone, not a part of NATO, as Dr. Kissinger suggested early on during the conflict.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Dr. Kissinger would later argue that ultimately it would be better to try and reintegrate Russia into the U.S.-led order rather than antagonize and isolate Putin into a corner with few options positive to American interests.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Henry Kissinger, "Henry Kissinger: To Settle the Ukraine Crisis, Start at the End," *Washington Post*, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9_story.html).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Heilbrunn, "The Interview: Henry Kissinger."

When scholars write about war, geopolitical shocks, or the rise and fall of states they are often tempted to do so in terms that suggest the actors involved were simply playing out their parts in the slow motion inevitability of a Greek or Shakespearian tragedy.<sup>18</sup> Yet the problem is that it is decisions that the citizens of each country, their leaders, and their organs of state make that result in success or failure, security or strategic disaster.<sup>19</sup> As Dr. John G. Stoessinger writes in his historical case study of the various causes of conflict, *Why Nations go to War*, “History does not make history. Men and women make foreign policy decisions. They make them in wisdom and folly, but they make them nonetheless. Often, after a war, historians look back and speak of fate or inevitability. But such historical determinism becomes merely a metaphor for evasion of responsibility.”<sup>20</sup>

This is why a pragmatic promotion of, and return to, the fundamental interests of American foreign policy is necessary. U.S. leadership is crucial to ensure a world that is more secure and safe for those fundamental pillars of physical security, economic prosperity, and values protection and promotion. These fundamentals are important to prevent getting bogged down in the conflicts or interests of other powers, both of which are often detrimental to America. And finally, the pragmatic approach is necessary to maintain the realistic-ness of realism as a school of thought against the dangers posed by the excesses of neoconservative bellicosity. Values and ideology matter, and they should be taken into consideration, but they should not trump practicality as a means of conducting foreign affairs.

As Dr. Kissinger wrote in *World Order* the question is whether America can continue to maintain and adjust a global arrangement in which most states, or at least the most powerful

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<sup>18</sup> John G. Stoessinger, *Why Nations Go to War*, 10th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008), 406–410.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 408.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

ones, cooperate in “observing common rules and norms, embracing liberal economic systems, forswearing territorial conquest, [and] respecting national sovereignty...”<sup>21</sup> Such a world is a safer world for American core interests, but it can only be sustained by prudent strategic thinking and pragmatic policies focused on long-term ends and not short-term gains. In other words, a return to realism is just what the Doctor, in this case Doctors Kissinger and Deibel, among others, ordered.

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<sup>21</sup> Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2014), 1–2.

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