The Clinton Doctrine

by Patrick Clawson **(/experts/patrick-clawson)**

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Articles & Testimony

Bill Clinton, the first post Cold War president, may be joining a select Cold War club. Since World War II, several presidents have had foreign policy axioms associated with their names: the Truman Doctrine, which launched containment; the Carter Doctrine, declaring the Persian Gulf a vital interest: the Reagan Doctrine, backing anti-Soviet guerrilla forces. So what's the Clinton Doctrine? The continued tensions with Iraq and the interminable intervention in Bosnia -- highlighted during Mr. Clinton's pre Christmas visit there -- raise the fear that this president's doctrine may be: We only intervene when there is no vital national security interest, particularly if a domestic special-interest group supports it and the risk of casualties is low.

This doctrine was not in evidence during Mr. Clinton's first full-scale security challenge in October 1994, when Saddam Hussein moved troops as if to invade Kuwait. Mr. Clinton responded by dispatching overwhelming force. Result: Saddam was put under more restrictions (a "no drive" zone near Kuwait); respect for U.S. resolve and might were reinforced; and the coalition against Saddam was reinvigorated.

Not to be deterred by success, the Clinton administration made that demonstration of force in Iraq the exception that proves the rule. Consider its response to the next two bona fide nation security emergencies it faced: the 1994 North Korean nuclear crisis and the current crisis over United Nations inspectors in Iraq. Both cases involved the "major regional contingencies" on which U.S. military planning is based. Yet in each we, Mr. Clinton's top priority was avoiding use of military force and confrontation, even if that meant accepting significant risks to U.S. interests.

Accepting Ambiguity

An uncharitable interpretation would be that Mr. Clinton simply declared victory and unleashed spinmeisters to persuade us it was so. In the case of North Korea, after declaring publicly that Pyongyang cannot be allowed to obtain nuclear weapons, the president decided to live with the possibility that it has one or two secret atomic bombs, rather than pressing for a more certain resolution that could have risked armed conflict. In the Iraq case, Mr. Clinton so far has accepted the ambiguity of the dangerous status quo ante, while Saddam gained an opportunity to hide the biological weapons that U.N. inspectors had been closing in on.

It may be argued that in both cases, Mr. Clinton pursued the prudent course, achieving partial fulfillment of U.S. objectives through diplomacy. Pyongyang, after all, agreed to freeze and eventually give up its nuclear weapons

program in exchange for various American blandishments. However, the U.S. could have carried out escalating sanctions until North Korea came into compliance with its International Atomic Energy Agency obligations. If Pyongyang responded with military action, it could have done enormous damage, but the result would have been a unified Korea, a dead communist dinosaur and a powerful lesson to other potential proliferators.

Similarly, the administration's defenders argued that using air and sea power against Iraq this year would not have gotten rid of Saddam or destroyed his weapons of mass destruction. A less generous view is that a serious bombing campaign against military and industrial facilities would have reduced Iraq's military capacity and made It clear that not cooperating with U.N. inspectors was very costly indeed.

Any way you slice it, these two chapters in Clinton foreign policy stand in sharp contrast with the occasions on which he has intervened militarily, humanitarian crises in Somalia, Haiti and Bosnia chief among them. There is no sufficient justification -- least none rooted in U.S. national security interests -- for any of these undertakings.

True, the Somalia effort was begun by President Bush. But Mr. Clinton changed the mission from humanitarian relief to nation-building, leading to the conflict with Muhammad Farah Aideed's forces. Haitian migrants are a problem for the U.S. But that's hardly an argument for a multibillion-dollar intervention that, as U.N. peacekeepers now depart three years later, appears to have made little difference in the country's endemic violence poverty and dysfunctional governance. Similarly, our Bosnia mission has stopped the mass killings -- for now -- but there's no sign of success in nation building. With Mr. Clinton admitting that U.S. troops won't be withdrawn by their June 1998 deadline, we now appear committed to a perennial troop presence to maintain order, a la Cyprus or Belfast.

Why go in to begin with? Bosnia is near to NATO, but there is little evidence of a "domino effect" by which the war in Bosnia would widen to the Balkans, Turkey and beyond. Preserving NATO's credibility is arguably a vital U.S. interest. However, there is no reason that peacekeeping outside NATO's area of responsibility is essential to the credibility of NATO as a military alliance. Rather, this appears to be an administration-spun tautology: We say it puts NATO's credibility on the line, so it must be true.

At bottom, all three cases are instances of social engineering passing for foreign policy. Those tendencies are strong in Mr. Clinton's foreign policy. After all, this is the administration that gave us "Engagement and Enlargement" as its national strategy. The term "engagement" is admirably intended to convey an embrace of internationalism and rejection of isolationism. But what it has meant in practice has tended to be a triumph of process over substance. How many times -- whether meeting with Yasser Arafat or Jiang Zemin -- have we heard top officials proclaim the measure of success is whether meetings proceed as scheduled, regardless of results?

By "enlargement" the administration means expanding the community of democratic states. But the U.S. role in promoting democracy, while important, is limited. Furthermore, it is not clear how important democracy is for national security strategy. And Fareed Zakaria's recent article in Foreign Affairs makes the crucial point that some democracies -- e.g., Peru and Iran -- are hardly paragons in respecting liberty. In sum, Engagement and Enlargement provides little practical guidance for foreign-policy decision making let alone military strategy.

The emphasis on Engagement and Enlargement does, however, reflect a view of the world that the administration came in with, though after the Somalia fiasco it was sublimated. Roughly put, it is a belief that the old ways of statecraft, the idea of geopolitics, are passe. Instead, it's all about geoeconomics. Ideas like "balance of power" must give way to the concept of "cooperative security," which emphasizes defusing threats by drawing potentially hostile states into a network of cooperation among a broad group of nations. The essential difference is that the old view pictured nations as at times having decidedly different interests, while the Clinton perspective implicitly assumes common interests if only issues are understood properly -- all states are said to benefit from cooperating on economic liberalization and conflict resolution.

In this view, all we need to manage conflict among states is to foster endless "dialogue." There is an unspoken sense that war among modern states is obsolete in this age of globalized economies. Violence is interpreted as social disorder by (war) criminals, rather than as the methodical pursuit of power by those whose interests are opposed to ours. There is pressure to convert the military into an instrument for police operations on a large scale, intervening where gangs get out of hand. And it is taken for granted that the U.S. position is the only just one, rejected only by the confused or the shortsighted who put temporary commercial interest ahead of humanity's greater good.

This world view reflects a discomfort with the concept of power and the reality of wielding it. The Clintonites put their trust in a "cooperative security" framework that makes some sense in the context of Western Europe. But notwithstanding Europe's recent harmony, the past 3,000 years of history suggests that greed, ambition, rivalry -- the ingredients for conflict -- unfortunately remain intact. Indeed, across rather large amounts of real estate from Southwest to Northeast Asia, the potential for old-style conflict -- this time with weapons of mass destruction -- is very real. At the end of a century during which human destructiveness has increased exponentially with each technological advance, it seems folly to believe that the dark side of human nature has been expunged from the soul of man.

But Mr. Clinton's foreign policy seems to operate in a sunnier world, where every disagreement can be ended with a deal. This has produced some notable achievements in the area of economics -- principally Nafta and GATT -- and arms control, where Mr. Clinton has hewed to an inherited policy. But this approach hasn't worked well in traditional political conflicts. Even the fabled "Middle East peace process" has become shaky.

To be sure, geoeconomics is of great importance in the new era we are entering. But military capabilities and old-fashioned balance-of-power politics still matter. For instance, Moscow is not talking NATO expansion lying down, but seeking to develop its own counterbalance, which is why Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov intervened in Iraq, and why Moscow has gotten so chummy with Beijing. Even in the case of France, there is more than mere resentment behind Paris's behavior towards Iraq and Iran.

There is a cost to building a foreign policy on hopes of beneficence rather than on rock-solid shared interests. First, there is a growing resentment among many nations of American "arrogance, " a view fostered by the administration's moralistic tone and its seeming refusal to concede that different nations may have different interests. Then, there is cynicism when the U.S. proclaims a universal mission of supporting democracy and human rights -- "enlargement" -- but has no idea of how to achieve these fine goals in a difficult case like Somalia, Haiti or Bosnia.

Fading Perception

Worst, however, is the fading perception among real or potential adversaries that we have clearly defined our vital interests, and that we are willing and able to defend them with military force. The corrosive effects could be substantial, especially if the U.S. military continues its transformation from an institution focused on killing people and destroying things toward an agency mainly for peacekeeping and policing. Over time, our friends and allies may become unsure whether our security umbrella is still reliable. The irony is that, by its pursuit of the chimera of "collective security" -- multilateral institutions that solve the problems among their members -- the Clinton administration will weaken the networks of "collective defense" we have so carefully built, whether formal alliances like NATO or the loose coalition that fought the Gulf War.

Of course, not all the fault is the administration's. Unburdened by the end of the Cold War, foreign policy has ceased to be a matter of great day-to-day concern by the public. Congress's behavior sometimes gives a sense of frivolous power rather than global stewardship -- as evidenced in the final hours of the legislative session last month when lawmakers deleted U.N. funds and the U.S. share of the International Monetary Fund in a fit of pique over birth-

control policy. Moreover, there is an impulse among many legislators to impose unilateral sanctions as the first line of response to any development in the world that offends American sensibilities, rather than only in cases vital to U.S. security.

But in the end, foreign policy is the president's responsibility. One hopes that episodes like the still-unfolding Iraq crisis reflect less an operational tenet than occasional tendencies. Saddam's defiance offers the president an opportunity to demonstrate that force is a credible option when vital U.S. interests are at stake. If he fails to do so, there is a real possibility that American guarantees will be discounted by adversaries and gradually replaced by, hedging strategies among friends and allies.

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