America's Grand Strategy in the Middle East:

Views from the Campaign

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In-Depth Reports

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On September 20, 2008, Max Boot and Richard Danzig addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Mr. Boot, an advisor to the presidential campaign of Sen. John McCain, is the Jeane J. Kirkpatrick senior fellow in national security studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Mr. Danzig, an advisor to the presidential campaign of Sen. Barack Obama, was secretary of the Navy during the administration of President Bill Clinton.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Max Boot

The next president will face a daunting array of challenges in the broader Middle East: preventing terrorist attacks, stemming weapons proliferation, maintaining the free flow of oil, and protecting U.S. allies from Afghanistan to Israel. No ideology or grand strategy can provide all the answers to these challenges. The situation requires a leader who is guided by a lifetime of experience -- one who will confront our enemies unflinchingly while remaining realistic about the possibilities of diplomacy. Although the next president should retain an element of "realistic idealism" in his foreign policy -- mainly by promoting liberal democracy -- he must also realize where idealism is appropriate and where it is not.

In Iraq, the troop surge was crucial to stabilizing the security situation. Its success enables us to withdraw some forces, rotating out five brigades this year and others as conditions permit. Yet the notion of withdrawing all combat brigades within sixteen months from January 2009 -- when the new U.S. president is inaugurated -- would risk relinquishing the gains of the surge, which Gen. David Petraeus has noted are fragile and reversible. Iraq policy should be dictated by the advice of military commanders on the ground, who advocate going slow on drawdowns.

The counterinsurgency lessons of Iraq -- which focus not on killing insurgents, but on providing security to the population -- are also applicable to Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Afghanistan, those lessons would require deploying three additional U.S. brigades, doubling the Afghan army's size, streamlining its command structure, appointing an Afghan policy czar and special presidential envoy, and formulating a plan that coordinates civilian and military efforts. In Pakistan, the United States should try to mobilize the western tribes in the same way it mobilized tribes in Iraq's Anbar province. This approach would require better cooperation from the Pakistani government and army. In contrast, a policy that triples nonmilitary aid to Pakistan while browbeating its government and applying conditions to that military aid is a policy at war with itself.

On Iran, the United States should pursue a strategy of prevention rather than deterrence. One troubling consequence of an Iranian nuclear-weapons capability is that it could surreptitiously provide fissile nuclear material to terrorist groups and ignite runaway proliferation in the region. Accordingly, the United States should not make concessions unless Iran is willing to match them. Tehran thus far has rejected all U.S. overtures, attempting to lure Washington

and Europe into open-ended negotiations while it develops nuclear weapons. Direct presidential diplomacy with Iran without preconditions would only dishearten Iranian dissidents and demoralize regional friends. Realistically, forcing Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions and sponsorship of terrorism will require increased pressure through additional UN sanctions. If those fail, the United States could pursue several other options: multilateral sanctions outside the UN on Iranian imports of refined petroleum, similar sanctions against the country's central bank, a worldwide divestment campaign, and designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organization.

On the Israeli-Palestinian front, the United States must maintain its unshakable commitment to Israel's security. Now is not the time to deepen our engagement in the kind of negotiating process that would pressure the Israelis into concessions that might endanger their security -- particularly on behalf of a peace agreement that the Palestinians are not likely to honor. Although the United States should not stand in the way if Israelis and Palestinians wish to conduct peace negotiations, there can be no lasting settlement until the Palestinians show they are truly interested in peaceful coexistence. Moreover, the conflict is only one of many regional problems, and an Israeli-Palestinian agreement would do little to solve the larger issues that give rise to terrorism.

In Lebanon, Hizballah has become a state within a state, and Syria continues to undermine the democratic process. Proponents of striking a deal with Syria ignore the price: return of the Golan Heights and the betrayal of Lebanon's democracy movement. Rather than spurning the lawfully elected government of Lebanon for a nebulous Syrian promise to cease supporting terrorism, the United States should provide more military aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces, increase support for schools and hospitals to undercut Hizballah's appeal, and ramp up efforts to isolate and weaken the Syrian regime until it ends its support for terrorism.

Richard Danzig

The next U.S. administration should pursue a policy of "sustainable security," which involves thinking strategically and building alliances that make its goals achievable. Toward this end, the next president should make rational use of a range of options; otherwise, U.S. economic and military resources could become drained to the point that they provide only short-term solutions. For example, the president should at least be open to the possibility of talking to adversaries and exploring common interests, particularly in relation to pressing challenges such as the mounting threat posed by Hizballah, Hamas, and Iran; the difficulties of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations; the tumult in Iraq; and the danger of instability in a nuclear Pakistan or a volatile Afghanistan.

Regarding Afghanistan, we need a timetable for reallocating resources from Iraq to Afghanistan, accepting the fact that the United States is in a stronger position when it is taking steps to withdraw from frontline combat. The Iraqis themselves -- and now the Bush administration -- have moved toward this position. The United States should retain enough forces in Iraq to continue training the Iraqi army and to strike at terrorists. At the same time, Washington should push the Iraqis to make the difficult choices that political reconciliation requires.

In the end, Afghanistan and Pakistan are the central fronts in the war on terror. At least two additional combat brigades should be sent to Afghanistan, but any serious strategy will effectively require training the Afghan army and police force to deal with corruption, improve the command structure, tackle the drug trade that funds the Taliban, and eliminate terrorist safe havens in Pakistan. On that last point, the U.S. military needs to be able to strike high-value targets in Pakistan if Islamabad is unable or unwilling to do so. Discussions on this and other issues must take Pakistani concerns and perceptions into account, including Islamabad's continued support for the Taliban (via its intelligence services) and its fears about Afghanistan. We must reassure Pakistan that we can jointly pursue overlapping interests; we can best convey this reassurance by using all elements of national power and not resorting to the militarization of U.S. policy.

Regarding Iran -- a threat to regional stability and an existential concern for Israel -- the United States and its allies should pursue a preventive strategy that involves large carrots and big sticks. Washington should not rely on a fundamentally risky strategy of deterrence. The Bush administration's policy of refusing to talk to Tehran has failed, and the regime has continued to produce enriched uranium. The United States needs to do all it can to avoid having to make the terrible choice between bombing Iran or living with a nuclear Iran. Any new strategy must offer the Iranians a means of rejoining the community of nations; at the same time, the United States must push for tougher multilateral sanctions targeting Iran's ability to import gasoline and conduct trade. Such sanctions would require the participation of China, Russia, India, and the United Arab Emirates. Therefore, unhelpful moves such as threatening to expel Russia from the Group of Eight only damage Washington's chances of securing Moscow's cooperation and doom efforts to make sanctions work. All in all, the carrot-and-stick strategy will require a credible American president who is inclined to work with others and is willing to talk, but who would nevertheless use force if necessary.

On the Israeli-Palestinian front, the proper U.S. role for the new administration is one of deep involvement from the beginning, which includes the appointment of an official envoy. This more vigorous engagement should come with an understanding that the United States cannot force a peace -- it is up to the Israelis and Palestinians to resolve the fundamental issues. U.S. involvement can give the negotiating parties the economic and security resources to withstand the criticism that they will inevitably receive from their own publics. Yet, this role is not sufficient for a successful process; we must also involve European and Middle Eastern nations diplomatically and financially, principally by convening an international meeting to discuss how to move forward. Whatever avenue is chosen, working for a solution would benefit Israel while helping the United States defuse an issue that feeds jihadist rhetoric and complicates a number of regional relationships. ❖

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