

**Threats and Opportunities for Advancing the  
Major Global Interests of the United States**

**Seminar L**

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## **PREFACE**

Politicians within our government have often justified their actions in the international arena as taken in support of the national interest.<sup>1</sup> During the Cold War, just about any reasonable action could have been defended in terms of supporting the national interest, which was to counter the spread of Soviet sponsored communism. But in the complex, ever-changing, increasingly globalized and interdependent world we live in today, the Red menace threat is no longer the primary unifying element of national security policy. Appropriate responses to threats such as regional conflicts, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and international crime are difficult to gauge, especially if they occur in unfamiliar regions of the globe (e.g., East Timor). In addition, the American public and Congress (with the help of the media), now demands more accountability and they repeatedly challenge the President to clearly outline exactly which of our important interests are to be served by taking the proactive or reactive steps in question. Challenges will be more intense when long and short term costs associated with taking those actions are not defined nor appropriately balanced against the risks. In order to develop an informed opinion on the justification for taking actions to counter threats or availing ourselves of opportunities for advancing our major global interests, an understanding of the term national interest is necessary.

## **INTERESTS**

National interests can be considered a set of values<sup>2</sup> which are influenced by a variety of factors, referred to as determinants. Our values have been shaped in part by our historical, cultural, geographical, demographical, technological, sociological, economic

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1. For the purpose of this paper, the terms “national” and “global” are synonymous.

2. Robert D. Blackwill, “History of the Term National Interest,” unpublished Council on Foreign Relations Discussion Papers, 1995, 3.

and natural resource environments.<sup>3</sup> For example, in our elementary schools, students are exposed to the basis for the American revolution as well as the Bill of Rights which are contained our Constitution. We are taught at a very early age that every American has the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We also learn the reasons we celebrate the holidays on our federal calendar (e.g., 4th of July, Labor Day, Washington's/Lincoln's birthday and Thanksgiving). By studying these issues we begin to understand the genesis of our national values. In addition, we are increasingly exposed to a number of media (i.e., television, radio and print) which consistently reinforce these and other themes of our heritage: "the flight from older cultures (e.g., the voyage of the Mayflower; escaping religious persecution), the rejection of central authority and aristocratic privilege (e.g., the Boston Tea Party; a rebellion against taxation without representation), the lure of the unspoiled frontier (e.g., the legend of Daniel Boone and the explorations of Lewis and Clark) and the struggle for harmony and justice (e.g., Abraham Lincoln's actions up to and during the Civil War)."<sup>4</sup> The American dream--striking it rich, going from rags to riches--is another celebrated theme in our society. The unencumbered pursuit of economic happiness is considered a fundamental right of every American citizen.

Naturally, through a constant exposure to these themes we conclude that everyone in the world should also be afforded the same freedoms (e.g., free speech, free press, right to assembly, right to a fair, speedy trial, right to elect its leaders) and opportunities (pursuit of economic abundance) we enjoy and it is not surprising we feel compelled to make the world a better place by spreading our values learned through these heritage themes<sup>5</sup>

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3. Bard. E. O'Neill, A Framework for Analysis and Discussion of Foreign Policy/National Security Strategy, (handout), Course 5601, National Defense University, 1999.

4. Robert B. Reich, "Four Morality Tales," Chapter 1 in *Tales of a New America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 3.

5. In this paper, I have used the term "heritage theme" as it more appropriately describes the meaning ascribed to what Robert B. Reich has termed "morality tales."

throughout the globe.

Besides our environment, international circumstances, domestic politics and the psyche of the many actors engaged in international affairs influence the development of our national interests.<sup>6</sup> The events of the world as they unfold affect the balance of power among countries. Trends, such as the information revolution, affect the speed and accuracy of information as well as the movement of capital around the world. Political parties and interest groups offer opinions as to what is considered to be in the national interest. While the Constitution sets foreign affairs under the purview of the executive branch, Congress and the courts have played an increasing role in shaping foreign policy. In addition, government officials are influenced in varying degrees by public opinion as portrayed by the media. Furthermore, all of the actors influencing or acting upon foreign affairs bring a variety of heritage themes, cultures and personalities into the arena.<sup>7</sup> Given the variety of determinants which influence our values, it is not surprising that defining our national interests is a complicated undertaking.

Obviously some of our values and interests will change over time. For example, demographic shifts will continue to occur in our country which may spawn new heritage themes. In addition, changing circumstances will affect the things Americans value. Today's headlines are full of these types of issues. For example, we value a healthy environment by opposing the burning of tropical forests in South America. We support humanitarian goals through the support of refugee relief efforts. In addition, we have pride in being number one; with the prestige and power associated with that lofty status.<sup>8</sup> However, these interests have not consistently been a major part of our national security

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6. Bard. E. O'Neill, *A Framework for Analysis and Discussion of Foreign Policy/National Security*

Strategy, (handout), Course 5601, National Defense University, 1999.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

policy. Only in the last part of the recent century has the United States made a concerted effort in substantially improving water and air quality within its borders and begun its efforts to promote environmental responsibility in other countries. Because we were initially focused on the development of our own country during the first century after our birth, humanitarian missions were not typically considered and in most cases were logistically impossible to support. America was not a major super power until the middle of this century and became the only super power after the fall of the Soviet empire in 1988. All of these interests are relatively new as compared to the fundamental national interests that have been evident since 1776: namely, the security and survival of the nation, the economic well-being of its citizens, and the promotion of our values throughout the world.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising to find these same interests (to enhance our security, to bolster America's economic prosperity, and to promote democracy abroad) contained in the Clinton administration's national security strategy document.<sup>10</sup>

## THREATS

Threats can be considered those events or circumstances that undermine the pursuit or jeopardize the attainment of the global interests of the United States. But since we are typically constrained by our resources, not all of the threats can be addressed to the extent we might desire. We must ensure the cost of our response is commensurate with the interests at risk.<sup>11</sup> Determining whether the threats are being waged against vital, major or

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9. Donald E. Nuechterlein, *America Recommitted: US National Interests in a Restructured World* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 7, quoted in Robert D. Blackwill, "Methodologies for Determining National Interests," unpublished Council on Foreign Relations Discussion Papers, 1995, 5. A favorable world order is also included as a fundamental, enduring national interest. But for the purposes of

this paper, I elected to subsume that interest as part of the promotion of our values.

10. A National Security Strategy for a New Century (Washington, DC: The White House, October 1998), iii. These interests are labeled as goals in this document.

11. Ibid., 5.

peripheral national interests is critical in determining appropriate responses.

Vital national interests are those that threaten the physical security of our nation.<sup>12</sup> It should come as no surprise that our primary enduring interest--the security of our nation--is included within this category. When directly threatened, this country has devoted all of its resources to the security and survival of the nation. The Civil War was the first big test of our ability to survive. Both World Wars, especially World War II, posed a substantial threat to our way of life. Today, given the superior technological advantages the United States Armed Forces possesses, Russia and China currently do not appear to pose a substantial direct threat to the security of the United States. (That is not to say that the internal strife within these countries won't produce instability in their respective regions. A peaceful transition to new economic and possibly new political systems within both of these countries is desired.) However, as was evident in the Civil War, threats to the survival of the country may come from within. For example, there is a concern that the ethnic identities within the United States, celebrated through diversity, can lead to a fracturing of our political ideology.<sup>13</sup> The dissolution of the melting pot has always been a concern for the United States, but there appears to be a heightened sense of awareness over this issue given the number of regional conflicts throughout the globe that have been borne from cultural, ethnic and religious differences (e.g., Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo and more recently East Timor) which were muted during the Cold War.<sup>14</sup>

Although threats to our major interests may not necessarily affect the immediate survival of our nation, they can affect our overall well-being or the character of the world

12. Ibid., 5.

13. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Erosion of American national Interests," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (September/October 1997), 34.

14. Eugene R. Wittkopf, "Americans' Foreign Policy Beliefs and Behavior at the Water's Edge," *International Studies Notes* 22 (Fall 1997), 1.

in which we live.<sup>15</sup> A number of our interests including our two other enduring interests--the economic well-being of its citizenry and the promotion of democratic values--are considered to be encompassed within this category. In the global environment, the Clinton administration has undertaken major initiatives to strength its economy through the reduction of protectionism and the elimination of barriers to free trade.<sup>16</sup> These initiatives have helped the economy to grow and maintain its position of dominance on the world market. However in furthering the globalization of trade, finance and information, threats can develop to national security. For example, there is concern that through globalization, "national and international borders are being eroded, and that private armies, transnational terrorist groups and drug cartels are rising to challenge the traditional states and international law."<sup>17</sup> Globalization facilitates the ability of terrorists and international criminals to develop and deploy the means to disrupt our economy, our modes of transportation, our energy supplies, our information systems and other infrastructure critical to our way of life. One of the biggest concerns is arresting the development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) not only by these transnational groups, but by rogue states, such as North Korea.

In developing WMD, the balance of power in regions can be disrupted. Furthermore, direct aggression can produce environmental disasters and/or an influx of refugees to adjacent states that are hoping to avoid civil unrest or even ethnic cleansing. All of these actions are in opposite to our values and therefore threaten our national security. While



the severity and location of these actions will play a role in shaping an appropriate

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15. A National Security Strategy for a New Century (Washington, DC: The White House, October 1998), 5.

16. Martin Walker, "The Clinton Doctrine," *New Yorker* (October 7, 1996), 6, 8.

17. Robert. E. Harkavy, "Images of the Coming International System," *Orbis* 41 (Fall 1997), 584.  
response, we must take proactive measures to arrest the spread of dangerous technologies  
response, we must take proactive measures to arrest the spread of dangerous technologies  
upon which these weapons are built.

Another aspect of the trend towards globalization--the information revolution--poses a number of threats to our security. The revolution in information technology has facilitated the flow of capital around the world and makes it increasingly difficult to control the money supply.<sup>18</sup> These unchecked flows are supposed to occur in a free market economy. But, that makes the markets susceptible to intentional or unintentional manipulations caused by events such as the disruption of a economy through civil unrest, environmental disaster or poor fiscal or monetary policy implementation. "A genuinely interdependent world market is extraordinarily fragile."<sup>19</sup> While we can affect the markets to some extent by our fiscal and monetary policies, our resources are nonetheless limited and our propensity to resist proactive governmental interference in global markets leads us to take a wait and see approach.

The increased visibility and manner in which world wide events are reported though the media--the so called CNN effect--can also affect the perception of a threat and stimulate a desire to respond.<sup>20</sup> Careful evaluation of the threat posed against the national interests can mitigate that effect and help ensure an appropriate response.

These examples, make it evident that globalization, which is being fueled by the information revolution, is blurring the distinction between domestic and international affairs

and generates threats to our national security.<sup>21</sup> The many non-state actors in this environ-

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18. Susan Strange, "The Erosion of the State," *Current History* (November 1997), 369.

19. Benjamin Schwarz, "Why America Thinks it Has to Run the World," *The Atlantic* 277 (June 1996), 102.

20. Richard N. Haass, "Sanctioning Madness," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (November/December 1997), 75.

21. Jean-Marie Guehenno, "The Impact of Globalization on Strategy," *Survival* 40 (Winter 1998 -99), 5.

ment (e.g., major financial institutions, the telecommunications industry and well financed

international criminal and terrorist elements) erode the control over internal events and thus impact the sovereignty of the nation and the security and well-being of its people.<sup>22</sup>

### **OPPORTUNITIES**

While there are many bona fide and potential threats to our national security, there are a number of opportunities that we can pursue that will enhance our national security, and minimize the development of threats.

The developing countries are recognized as the big growth markets of the next century, yet they contain stiff barriers to trade.<sup>23</sup> Economic principles state that everyone gains from free trade because global resources are more efficiently allocated and goods will be optimally priced. Therefore it makes sense that we promote free trade. In doing so, undoubtedly we will be challenged in our efforts to level the international (price) playing field by establishing equitable standards for labor and the use of the environment in the production of products. However, in the long run those efforts support our global interests by offering the chance to produce a better standard of living for all.

We have the ability to wield substantial military and economic power. However, we need to be careful that we do not alienate our friends and allies by taking unnecessary unilateral action that could have been avoided by using our "soft power;"<sup>24</sup> by employing

other less coercive instruments of statecraft. We must use the full spectrum of our tools--diplomacy, force, economic power and information in an integrated manner through

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22. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Conflicts After the Cold War," *The Washington Quarterly* 19 (Winter 1996), 16.

23. Gary C. Hufbauer and Jeffrey J. Schott, "Strategies for Multilateral Trade Liberalization," Chapter 7 in Geza Feketekey, ed., with Bruce Stokes, *Trade Strategies for a New Era* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1998), 126.

24. Steven R. Mann, "The Interlocking Trinity," NWC Student Core Course Paper, 1991, 2. various agencies and other countries. We must recognize that "when numerous states pursue security, clashes among them are unavoidable. Therefore, the intelligent pursuit of national security must blend concerns for the order of the whole and safety of the part."<sup>25</sup> Unilateral actions, while appropriate in some instances, may cause collateral damage to our long term goals as well as sour the character of our relationship with other countries. By effectively building coalitions, like we did before the Gulf War, we may be even more successful in securing our national interests--vital, major as well as peripheral--with reasonable risk-taking and manageable costs. The concept of coalition building and multi-lateral action is not new. America's participation in coalitions was instrumental in the outcomes of both world wars and the cold war. Moreover, teamwork-*e pluribus unum*-is a critical part of our heritage themes. Thirteen separate colonies, each with distinct interests, banded together to fight a powerful common foe. It is appropriate to reaffirm this heritage theme. Prudent pursuit of goals through multi-lateral initiatives can be effective, especially in this period of globalization.<sup>26</sup>

The world of foreign policy has been made more difficult because of the globalization of information and the economy. In addition there is no longer a unifying threat which makes it easy to articulate a national security strategy. In this period of uncertainty and change effective leadership abroad will be the key to security at home.<sup>27</sup> However, the

American people seem to be tiring of the burdens of leadership and are turning more towards isolationism.<sup>28</sup> This is a dangerous path. We need to advance our national

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25. Inis L. Claude, Jr., "Theoretical Approaches to National Security and World Order," Chapter 2 in John Norton Moore (ed), *National Security Law* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1990), 45.

26. Robert B. Reich, "Four Morality Tales," Chapter 1 in *Tales of a New America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 19.

27. A National Security Strategy for a New Century (Washington, DC: The White House, October 1998), 1.

28. Eugene R. Wittkopf, "Americans' Foreign Policy Beliefs and Behavior at the Water's Edge," *International Studies Notes* 22 (Fall 1997), 1.

interests, not just defend them.<sup>29</sup> "Leadership by the US as the world's leading economy, its most powerful military force and a leading democracy, is a key factor in limiting the frequency and destructiveness of great power, regional and communal conflicts."<sup>30</sup> It would be irresponsible to abdicate a leadership role, especially when the world is ripe for shaping.

The following quote offers an appropriate course for leadership during this opportunistic period of uncertainty and rapid change:

"The paradox facing U.S. policy is that the more Americans assert their power in hopes of shaping the global environment, the more they may generate resentment, resistance, and results opposite of those they intend. To do nothing, on the other hand, seems fatalistic, selfish, and short-sighted. What the United States can do is continue to promote democracy, free trade, and a balance of power politics among the major players, fight a rearguard action against the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and attempt to alleviate the suffering of "have-nots" in its own neighborhood."<sup>31</sup>

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29. Syllabus for Course 5601, Fundamentals of Statecraft, National Defense University, 1999, 15.

30. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Conflicts After the Cold War," *The Washington Quarterly* 19 (Winter 1996), 20. 11

31. Robert. E. Harkavy, "Images of the Coming International System," *Orbis* 41 (Fall 1997), 590.

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

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