

PREDICTING THE FUTURE AND PRESCRIBING FOR THE FUTURE:  
WHAT LOOMS AHEAD? WHAT POLICIES SHOULD THE U.S. ADOPT?

I. COURSE THEORIES: DID THEY PASS/FLUNK TESTS? WHAT DID THEY EXPLAIN?

Which theories survived confrontation with the evidence, and which did not? How much history do they explain? What evaluative conclusions follow from our answers? (E.g., did the U.S. overlook valid theories? Place faith in false ones?)

A. Offense-defense (security dilemma) theory: US foreign policy as a test and a case to explain.

1. Threat variant: the greater the security threat states face, the more aggressive they become.

2. Opportunity variant: the more easily states can conquer, the more aggressive they become.

Does U.S. activism correlate with America's sense of insecurity? Of opportunity? Was American policy driven by a search for security or a desire to exploit opportunity? Were America's adversaries driven by security concerns, or tempted by opportunity? Was the U.S. in fact insecure? Was it sufficiently aware of others' security concerns and their likely reaction to a U.S. threat?

B. Alliance theories:

1. Balance of threat theory: can it explain the Cold War's structure? What policy implications follow?

2. Birds of a feather: did they fly together? How often did the common U.S. expectation that birds of a feather would fly together prove accurate?

C. Spiral model vs. Deterrence: which model explains more? (Does either explain much?) Possible spirals: the US vs. 3rd World; USSR vs. Western Europe. Possible deterrence failures: US vs. Iraq 1991.

D. Foreign Policy Elite theories: did elite values/personalities matter?

E. Marxist theories: do they explain anything? U.S. entry into WWI? Guatemala 1954?

II. EVALUATING US FOREIGN POLICIES

A. U.S. policies toward Europe, 1914-present.

1. Effects on Europe: did U.S. policies help or harm Europe?

2. Effects on the U.S.: was involvement in Europe a wasteful adventure or a wise investment?

B. U.S. policies toward the Third World, 1898-present.

1. Effects on Third World: was the U.S. an "evil empire" or white knight?

2. Effects on the U.S.: was Third World involvement a "bungle in the jungle" or a smart stratagem?

C. Overall quality of U.S. foreign policy making process: how

closely does it match the rational-legal scientific ideal? Is American foreign policy made by strategic wizards or by blundering bureaucrats and ignoramus voters?

### III. PREDICTING THE FUTURE / PRESCRIBING FOR THE FUTURE

- A. How serious are geopolitical threats (that is, the threat of too much power in the hands of bad-acting states)? Should the U.S. act to avert them?
1. The rise of China. Should the U.S. try to hamper China's growth? Break China up? Help China grow, on the theory that this will promote Chinese democracy? On what theoretical or moral assumptions does the issue rest?
  2. The rise of other states: Russia? Should the U.S. try to stop their rise?
  3. The rise of nuclear proliferators. Should the U.S. try to stop or even reverse WMD proliferation? If so, how?
    - i. What threat would a nuclear Iran or more-nuclear North Korea pose? What benefits would war to disarm them provide?
      - a. Will N. Korea or Iran hand WMD to terrorists?
      - b. Will N. Korea or Iran aggress against neighbors, believing that their nuclear umbrellas protect them from countermeasures?
    - ii. What tactics are most likely to end the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs?
      - a. Coercing them into dropping their nuclear programs by economic sanctions?
      - b. Preventing them from exporting their nuclear weapons by blockade?
      - c. Somehow overthrowing their regimes by economic pressure and/or covert action?
      - d. Weaning them from their nuclear programs by positive inducements--trade agreements or security guarantees?
      - e. Or is war necessary? Or might even war be futile? Counterproductive?

Regarding Iran, the George W. Bush administration put all its chips on regime change. This didn't work, as Iran's regime survived. The Obama administration then used economic sanctions during 2010-15 to coerce Iran to cut a deal, and Iran to agree a deal in 2015. The Trump administration now seems to be moving to abrogate the deal. Good idea?
    - iii. Would an effort to remove Iranian or North Korean WMD by force succeed? Would it deter or dissuade proliferation by other WMD-seekers? Or might it frighten these WMD seekers to seek WMD more actively?

Consider both an airpower-only U.S. war on

- Iran, and a U.S. ground invasion and occupation of Iran.
- iv. At what cost could such wars be won? And could the U.S. manage the occupations of N. Korea or Iran?
  - v. Is arms control an answer to nuclear proliferation? Is U.S. nuclear restraint or disarmament an answer?
  - vi. How should the U.S. address the longer-term danger posed by emerging destructive technologies (biotechnology, nanotechnology) as described by Martin Rees, Our Final Hour. We need answers to this question, as these technologies (e.g., CRISPR) are upon us!!
- B. How large is the WMD terror threat? How should it be addressed?
- Specific related dangers:
- Al-Qaeda and ISIS, how to address them?
  - "Loose nukes": Russian loose nukes; poorly secured nuclear material at research reactors. Al-Qaeda or other terrorists may get their WMD from Russia or research reactors. Let's finish securing this stuff!
  - Unstable Pakistan: Al-Qaeda uses Pakistan as a haven, and the Afghan Taliban uses Pakistan as a base for its rampaging in Afghanistan. Some in the Pakistan military are religious extremists. And **Pakistan has ~80-100 nuclear weapons**. So terrorists might gain WMD there too. So let's stabilize it! But how??? Serious thought is needed. Some analysts think **Pakistan is the most dangerous place in the world**. But the U.S. has no plan to address it.
- C. Peacemaking.
1. The Israel-Palestinian conflict. Could the U.S. impose peace on Israel and the Palestinians?  
Many experts argue that the continuation of this conflict harms American standing in the Islamic world and strengthens al-Qaeda. Some say the US could produce peace if it twisted arms.
  2. The India-Pakistan conflict. This conflict is fuelling Islamic terrorism, radicalism in Pakistan, and Pakistani support for the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. Is it time for the U.S. to push for a peace settlement? Could the U.S. achieve one?
  3. Consider a larger move to resolve things in South Asia--a pair of grand bargains:
    - a. Push for India-Pakistan peace.
    - b. Organize the neutralization of Afghanistan.
  4. Consider moves to resolve civil wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Ukraine; also South Sudan, Central African Republic, Congo. And to avert war in Burundi.
- D. Saving the global commons, especially the environment.

Unchecked climate change could do great economic damage and displace scores or hundreds of millions of people. Can we solve this problem? See assigned articles by Frank, Homer-Dixon, and Davenport.

Climate change can probably be halted by phasing in a steep global carbon tax. Such a tax would spark the creation of potent new clean energy technologies that are unimagined today. These green technologies would replace carbon-based energy by underbidding it in the market. This solution would cost rather little--far less than 1 percent of gross world product per year. See assigned article by Joe Romm. Ominously, however, six imposing problems make it unlikely that we will halt climate change.

(1) The individual pursuit of self-interest makes the problem worse, not better. The environment is a "commons" or "collective good," so individuals are rewarded by taking actions that harm it--although the group as a whole is injured. **Market forces therefore cannot solve this problem.**

(2) Global warming pits a concentrated special interest--the oil and coal industries--against the general global public interest, which is harmed by warming. Special interests almost always defeat the general interest because they are better organized. So Exxon Mobil, which opposes action against climate change, has more influence than the broad public.

(3) Solutions to global warming require international cooperation. The world's major states must jointly agree to implement a carbon tax. But governments are bad at cooperation, and bad at solving problems that require cooperation with others.

(4) Delayed damage--the harm done by emitting greenhouse gasses is delayed, and so is largely hidden while the damage is being done. The human race may unleash irreversible climatic calamity before the first signs of that calamity become clear.

Solutions to this conundrum requires that the American public know enough science to appreciate the potential dangers of dynamics that science has identified (like climate change) but are not yet manifest. But the U.S. public knows little science and does not listen to scientists. See assigned article by Cornelia Dean.

(5) Western moral and religious traditions (unlike others, e.g. the Iroquois<sup>1</sup>) give short shrift to the rights of future generations. Instead our ethics assume

---

<sup>1</sup> The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy required that: "In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."

that each generation must solve its own problems. Hence we see little duty to sacrifice to preserve the world for future generations. Watch out grandchildren! We live for ourselves, not for you!

(6) The threat posed by climate change has an anodyne appearance that does not resonate with human threat responses. No blood or sharp teeth.

Bottom line: global warming has a clear solution but the human race is probably incapable of implementing that solution. Oh dear!

- E. Human rights: what about doing the right thing? "Those who really deserve praise are the people who, while human enough to enjoy power, nevertheless pay more attention to justice than they are compelled to do by their situation." (Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, trans. Rex Warner [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972], p. 80.)

#### IV. WHAT GRAND STRATEGY SHOULD THE U.S. ADOPT?

Consider again the broad options we discussed in September:

**Isolation**

**Neo-containment Type #1:** the U.S. contains China's rise.

**Neo-containment Type #2:** the U.S. limits the access of some states (North Korea, Iran) to WMD.

**Neo-rollback:** the USA wages preventive war against rogue states that pursue WMD.

**Promoting peace:**

> **Selective pacification**, or "selective engagement": the U.S. prevents interstate conflict/war in industrial regions.

> **Global pacification/New World Order:** the U.S. prevents interstate conflict/war everywhere.

**U.S. global empire:** the U.S. seeks to shape other states' domestic political and economic order.

**Concert:** the U.S. seeks to cooperate with other major powers, including China, to avert WMD terror and to stem climate change.

You be the judge.

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<https://ocw.mit.edu>

17.40 American Foreign Policy: Past, Present, Future  
Fall 2017

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.