

Defining The Post-Cold War National Interest

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Abstract

After almost a decade after the close of the Cold War, the U.S. still has not articulated a clear foreign policy doctrine for the post-Cold War world. During the Cold War, the yardstick was straightforward: how well the U.S. was doing in the worldwide struggle against the Soviet Union. In the wake of the Cold War, the U.S. has an opportunity to return to a pre-Cold War concept of the national interest, a national interest based on classical realism, but has thus far failed to do so. This article describes interventions that point to U.S. adherence to an

anachronistic, Cold War, idealistic definition of national interest, and argues in favor of adoption of a classical realist definition of national interest, a national interest based on bedrock elements of self-preservation, independence, territorial integrity, military security, and economic well-being.

National interest, as a concept, comes from classical realism where it means, in its rawest form, national survival. The end of the Cold War necessitates a redefinition of the United States' national interest. The Cold War led the United States far beyond the realist bedrock of national interest into interventions intended to promote American values, supported by foreign policies concerned with universal moral principles. The Cold War gave us idealism as a major basis for American foreign policy. Now that we no longer have to roll back Communism, it is time to return to pursuit of the national interest in its classical, realistic form, which is composed of those elements that constitute the state's most vital needs. These elements include self-preservation, independence, territorial integrity, military security, and economic well-being.

With the disappearance of the familiar foreign policy guideposts of the Cold War, the United States has not yet embraced the classical, realist approach to the national interest, but has, instead, continued to pursue a foreign policy of idealism. This misplaced, idealistic policy can be identified by comparing two Caribbean invasions, 10 years apart, in which the U.S. sought to remove unfriendly governments: the Reagan administration's dispatch of forces to Grenada in 1983 and the Clinton administration's efforts to intervene in Haiti in 1993 and 1994. By most criteria, Haiti is the more important of the two: larger, closer, a source of refugees, and a country that the U.S. had occupied from 1915 to 1935. Yet the intervention in Grenada was successful; the intervention in Haiti was not. Following comparison of the interventions in Grenada and Haiti, a discussion of recent U.S. intervention in Bosnia illustrates the folly that results from clinging to an idealistic, Cold War definition of national interest.

The U.S. intervention in Grenada was successful because it was part of the Cold War. The radical Grenadan government was aligned with Cuba, an ally of the Soviet union, with which the United States was locked in mortal struggle. The intervention in Grenada could thus be portrayed as an act of self-preservation and even territorial integrity, albeit at several removes, as causes well within the bedrock national interest elements for which Americans have always been willing to sacrifice. The invasion of Haiti could not be presented in that light. Grenada could be seen as affecting American interests. With the end of the Cold War, Haiti could not. It was the conflict with the Soviet Union that connected intervention to American interests.

While the decision to intervene was not easier during the Cold War, it was simpler: U.S. presidents did not necessarily know when to use force, but they always knew why—to combat the Soviet Union, its allies, and its clients, and thus defend American national interests. The argument for intervention was not always universally persuasive, but it was always plausible. In Haiti and later in Bosnia, the arguments for intervention were and are not even plausible.

In Haiti, the U.S. tried to dislodge the junta led by Raoul Cedras, and in October, 1994, landed troops which resulted in the departure of the junta leader and the return of Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The administration had promised not simply to return Aristide, but to restore (or, more accurately, create) democracy and help the country lift itself out of destitution, which required the establishment of a stable political system, the rule of law, and a freely functioning, market economy.

Because Haiti lacked all three, the administration's goals could not be accomplished overnight. To give Haiti a chance to reach them required a substantial American commitment. This the Clinton administration was not able to give. The stay of American and U.N. troops was to be short, ending in February, 1996.

The Clinton administration tried to make a case for invading Haiti, falling back on the kinds of arguments that had justified the use of force during the Cold War. J. Brian Atwood, the director of the U.S. Agency for International Development, attempted to connect autocratic rule in Haiti with American interests by asserting that it was an assault on the progress toward democracy that has been made throughout the hemisphere.

The argument was inappropriate in a way that was both comic and tragic: comic because it was ludicrous to contend that the fate of a small, impoverished Caribbean island would affect Mexico, Argentina, or Brazil; tragic in that it was because Haiti was so isolated that its political and economic conditions had become miserable.

That appeal to national interest failed because the United States had no bedrock interest in Haiti. It is difficult, in a post Cold War international arena, to make a case for such intervention when elements of the national interest are defined as self-preservation, independence, territorial integrity, military security, and economic well-being.

Bosnia is more complicated than Haiti because it involves relations with America's European allies, Britain and France, with whom for 30 months the Clinton administration was at odds. The Europeans deemed the conflict a civil war, to be ended as soon as possible even at the cost of a settlement unfavorable to Bosnia's Muslim government in Sarajevo. The U.S., in contrast, viewed the war as Serbian aggression against Bosnia. Its goal was justice for the Bosnian government even at the price of prolonging the war. The U.S. favored air strikes against the Serbs.

The Americans and the Europeans were each able to veto the policy the other wanted. The U.S. prevented the implementation of peace plans; the Europeans blocked all but token bombing. The war dragged on. More and more people were killed and displaced, transatlantic acrimony mounted, and the gap between bellicose pronouncements and timid actions made the Western powers look increasingly inept.

Where flimsy political support had forced the Clinton administration to compromise on the implementation of its goals in Haiti in 1994, in Bosnia in 1995, political weakness compelled compromise on the goals themselves. Indeed, the principles that the administration had said were at stake in Bosnia were all but abandoned; the settlement rewarded what the administration had termed Serb aggression and ratified the results of ethnic cleansing. The U.S. negotiated directly with Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, whom the administration had initially considered a war criminal. Bosnia was partitioned along ethnic lines, subverting the principles of undiluted sovereignty and ethnic pluralism that members of the Clinton administration had insisted, in 1993 and 1994, were inviolable.

The single indisputable American accomplishment in the Balkans between 1993 and 1995 was to assist Croatia in gaining control of some additional territory in Bosnia and all the territory it had included as a Yugoslav republic. This, however, was hardly a victory for American values. The Croats had practiced ethnic cleansing on a scale comparable to the Bosnian Serbs and were just as ardent about ethnic homogeneity and intolerance of Muslims. The federation between Croats and Muslims in Bosnia that the U.S. had brokered in 1994 was a partition between the two groups in all but name.

Prior to the Dayton negotiations, the administration had promised to send as many as 25,000 American troops to Bosnia as part of a peace settlement and, as it had with the invasion of Haiti, struggled to find a rationale for this. As with Haiti, national interests were said to be at stake, specifically the interest in avoiding a large conflict. President Clinton said that if war reignited in Bosnia, it would spark a much wider conflagration, and pointed to the 1914 gunshot in Sarajevo that launched the first of two world wars as precedent.

The conditions that had led to World War I, however, were absent eight decades later. The assassination of the heir to the Hapsburg throne in 1914 was the occasion for rival great powers to settle their differences by war. There is no such rivalry for the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s to ignite. Indeed, post-Cold War Europe

lacks great European military powers to prosecute such rivalry; Russia is not great, Germany is not military, and the United States is not European. The people of the former Yugoslavia were allowed to fight over its territory precisely because their wars did not pose a threat to the rest of Europe.

The United States, its European allies, and the Soviet Union would not have allowed Yugoslavia to disintegrate during the Cold War, the end of which has made Europe safe for war in the Balkans. Because Bosnia could not plausibly be connected to interests the American public would consider worthy of sacrificing blood and treasure to defend, the support for dispatching American troops to enforce the Dayton accords was bound to be weak. As in Haiti, therefore, the chief purpose of an American expeditionary force in Bosnia would be to leave as soon as possible, with as few casualties as possible, rather than to do whatever was necessary, for as long as necessary, to keep (or make) peace.

The United States needs to establish a clear set of priorities for American foreign policy in the post-Cold War era because our national interests can no longer be expressed simply as opposition to the Soviet Union. A redefinition of national interest, within the confines of classical realism, translates as follows.

Firstly, the maintenance of an American military presence in Europe and in the Asia-Pacific region is essential to the national interest although the goal has changed. During the Cold War, the mission of American forces abroad was to deter the Soviet Union. Today it is to reassure all countries in both regions that there will be no sudden change in the military balance. This is especially important for Germany and Japan. Without the assurance of American protection, they might feel the need for stronger military forces, ultimately including nuclear weapons. The suspicion that the two might adopt such politics would alarm their neighbors, who would feel the need to adopt military policies that would, in turn, alarm Germany and Japan. American force serves as a barrier to such dangerous chain reactions. It is therefore important to keep some of them in place.

The United States has a major security interest on the periphery of the international system: preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. A North Korean nuclear arsenal would upset the balance of power in East Asia; a bomb in the hands of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein would jeopardize American interests in the Middle East and Europe. A campaign against nuclear proliferation is a complicated, open-ended task that requires extensive international cooperation. The United States is the indispensable leader of the campaign.

A third, principal, post-Cold War purpose of American foreign policy is trade. The passage of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the North American Free Trade Agreement both expanded the international trading system that has contributed mightily to global economic growth for five decades.

Trade was related to a policy the Clinton administration intermittently practiced, one that lent coherence to a seemingly disparate set of initiatives and provided a justification for the most controversial of them. American economic engagement of the promotion of liberal economic policies that would create wealth and expand freedom was a common feature of the Clinton's administration's decision to grant most favored trading status to China, economic assistance to Russia, and diplomatic recognition to Vietnam.

During the Cold War, each of these countries posed a threat to American interests. Reducing their power through economic isolation was then the proper policy. With the end of the Cold War, American policy could safely and appropriately be reoriented toward promoting freer domestic politics. Market reforms in China, Russia, and Vietnam have had that effect. This rationale justifies a policy of economic engagement with them and with Cuba in the event of real market reforms there, but not with Iran or Iraq, whose governments continue to threaten American interests.