

PolicyWatch #1246 : Special Forum Report

Advancing U.S. Interests in the Middle East: The Case for Statecraft

Featuring Dennis Ross and Thomas Friedman
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On June 11, 2007, Dennis Ross and Thomas Friedman addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Ambassador Ross, the Institute's counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow, is a former U.S. Middle East peace envoy and author of the just-released book [Statecraft, And How to Restore America's Standing in the World](#) (2007). Mr. Friedman, a three-time recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, is the chief foreign affairs columnist for the New York Times. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Dennis Ross

Born of a concern for the diminishing practice of U.S. statecraft in recent years, my new book seeks to provide useful policy recommendations to the next administration for pursuing and protecting U.S. interests abroad. Statecraft entails skillful wielding of the various tools of diplomacy: timely employment of intelligence, the use of public information to shape and frame policies, and an understanding of whether "hard" or "soft" power is most appropriate under given circumstances. Each of these instruments must ultimately serve purposes that are firmly grounded in reality. It is essential that Washington clearly define America's role in world affairs and adeptly employ the tools of statecraft.

Marrying realistic objectives and means is a key part of statecraft. For example, the United States failed to integrate its short- and long-term objectives in Iraq with its actual means of achieving them. Even if Iraq had in fact possessed weapons of mass destruction, the U.S. forces deployed were insufficient to either secure their probable storage sites or prevent them from being smuggled out of Iraq. Indeed, America's problems in Iraq stem from a reliance on faith-based assumptions rather than assessments rooted in reality. With a reality-based understanding of Iraqi political relationships, for example, the growing insurgency and sectarian conflicts could perhaps have been predicted before the war. These factors do not necessarily indicate that going into Iraq was wrong, but they do argue for making reality-based assessments when dealing with potential war.

Similarly, in dealing with Iranian nuclear ambitions, the Bush administration has made only partial use of its options for synchronizing objectives and means. The passage of UN Security Council resolutions denouncing Iranian actions was a good first step toward isolating the regime, and an example of good statecraft. But it is still not a good marriage of means and objectives: the UN's slow-motion diplomacy does not match Iran's fast-paced nuclear development. Producing a preferred outcome on this issue depends on identifying points of leverage. Negotiation and mediation are tools of statecraft, but without leverage, they are doomed to fail. Leverage comes from a full understanding of the wants and needs of one's adversary -- Iran's economic failings, for example, are a vulnerability. Timing is central as well -- a limited application of economic sanctions has sparked a domestic debate in Iran and created an opening for the world community to influence the regime's policies.

The ability to mobilize foreign resources and processes also epitomizes successful statecraft. This is achieved by framing critical issues clearly and persuasively. By highlighting the shared goal of preventing Tehran's nuclear agenda, for example, America can work on motivating its allies -- namely Europe, Israel, and the greater Middle East -- to bring direct or indirect pressure on Iran. Expanded economic sanctions would

increase Europe's leverage in Iranian affairs by compelling Iranian policymakers to weigh the costs and benefits of continuing on the nuclear track. In contrast, a nuclear Iran would trigger a new arms race in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia would likely seek to produce its own deterrent to Iran, possibly with Pakistani technical aid, while Egypt and other Arab states would have similar ambitions. All of this would surely spell the end of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

The effective use of statecraft will always be vital in determining America's impact on world events. By understanding and applying the concept, the next U.S. administration can help change the global realities that emerge in the coming years -- however daunting they may at first appear.

Thomas Friedman

Leverage is the sine qua non of statecraft and negotiation. During the invasion of Iraq, President Bush promised the American public much, but he commissioned a mere 144,000 troops to carry the burden of what was meant to be one of the greatest transformative initiatives in the history of U.S. foreign policy: invading a country half a world away in order to reform it. It was not a practical goal from the start. As one Pentagon official recently stated, "A vision without resources is a hallucination." One cannot will the end without willing the means.

To achieve leverage at the outset of negotiations with another country, Washington must come to certain internal agreements. The current administration is arguably the most internally divided in recent history, particularly on its core issues. Leverage begins with internal consensus on where to go and what approaches to use for getting there. With respect to Syria, Iran, North Korea, and others, this administration has never made up its mind whether its goal is "regime change" or "change of regime behavior." Consequently, it has achieved neither.

Another important factor in gaining leverage today is the ability to bring down world oil prices. If the price of oil dropped by about 40 percent, Iran's entire government budget as it stands today would be going to subsidies -- an unsustainable arrangement. Rather than asking every American to sacrifice just a little in order to affect oil prices, Washington asked a few Americans -- 144,000 to be exact -- to make the ultimate sacrifice. As a result, it has amassed zero leverage in challenging Iranian ambitions.

In the world of petropolitics, the price of oil and the pace of freedom are inversely correlated. For instance, when oil prices were at \$20 per barrel, Iranian president Muhammad Khatami called for a "dialogue of civilizations"; at \$70 per barrel, President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad called for the destruction of Israel and claimed the Holocaust was a myth. Similarly, when prices were low, Bush looked into Russian president Vladimir Putin's soul and saw a good man. Later, when prices rose, Putin took control of Gazprom, *Izvestia*, *Pravda*, and any other Russian media, corporate, or government institution he could seize. Without reducing oil consumption at home, the United States will always have to deal with those often-hostile governments that rely on high oil prices.

Another problem in securing leverage in the region has been America's role as both a target and a protector of individual regional actors. Leverage cannot emerge out of a fluctuating U.S. relationship with states that view one another as adversaries. In terms of shifting ties with America, all of these nations have choices -- except the United States itself. In Iraq, for example, only a firm U.S. withdrawal date would compel regional competitors to make sustainable decisions about their own role there. The problem of leverage is further complicated by the fact that the enemies of the United States have chosen not to play by the rules. Iran and Syria in particular have been complicit in killing Americans via regional proxies without paying any significant price for these actions.

America also lacks leverage with its allies. For example, the European Union could reshape the Iranian crisis with a single, clear decision: a resolution that threatens to impose complete economic sanctions on Iran until it suspends uranium enrichment. Such a measure would spark internal debate and compel the regime to rethink

its atomic energy goals. But the EU has not done this.

Finally, it is worth noting that the United States has never come to terms with the real intelligence failure in Iraq. Instead of focusing on weapons of mass destruction, the administration should have examined the actual domestic conditions of the Iraqi people prior to the invasion -- how traumatized and pulverized they were by the UN sanctions and the wars of 1991-2003. In 2003, Iraq under Saddam Hussein was essentially a rotten fruit that was just about to fall to the ground, but the United States instead chose that moment to pluck it. Having not analyzed Iraqi society before toppling the Baathist regime, America basically broke the country -- and now owns it. In its own way, this misstep epitomizes the administration's repeated failure to secure proper leverage when approaching international crises.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Ira Hubert.

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