

# Back to basics:

## A Progressive Foreign Policy Doctrine for a World Thirsty for Clarity

By Didier Jacobs, author of *Global Democracy*<sup>1</sup>  
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I recently took a family vacation in Florida. In the stadium of SeaWorld, an anchorwoman proposed a tribute before the killer whales' show:

*"Now all those of you who served in the US military or in the armed forces of Britain or other allies, please stand up!"*

I found that formulation interesting. I am a Belgian citizen. Had I served in the military, I would have stood up because Belgium is a member of NATO. Had I been Iranian or North Korean, I would have stood up, and walked out. But what if I had served in the military of one of the 161 sovereign states that are neither part of the Axis of Evil nor treaty allies of the United States?<sup>2</sup> I would have felt awkward.

For we live in an awkward world. In the nineteenth century, you stood up for your fatherland only – forget about Britain and other allies. During the Cold War, every nation clearly belonged to either the free or the communist world, or was officially non-aligned.

Today, despite lingering border and regional conflicts, the international community is more united than ever before. Yet that unity and friendship is awkward.

Pakistani soldiers might stand up in Shamu's stadium, though some of them might do so holding their nose. Russians and Chinese would stay sit, and might ponder the thin line between not being an ally and being an enemy-in-waiting. Nationals of scores of countries would rather avoid the choice of making a stand, as ambiguity suits them just fine.

Parag Khanna has described our multipolar world as one dominated by three superpowers: the United States, the European Union, and China, each of which proposes a different value proposition to second-tier powers.<sup>3</sup> Briefly, the United States proposes military protection, and a large market. The European Union proposes law and order through international institutions,

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<sup>1</sup> Didier Jacobs, *Global Democracy: The Struggle for Political and Civil Rights in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press (2007). [www.global-citizens.org](http://www.global-citizens.org).

<sup>2</sup> The North Atlantic Treaty includes the following states: Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Greece, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom, and United States.

The United States also has bilateral mutual defense treaties with the following states: Australia, Japan, Philippines, and South Korea.

A US law also designates the following states as "major non-NATO allies" and confers to them a variety of military and financial advantages otherwise only available to NATO member-states (but not a commitment to mutual defense): the four states with bilateral defense treaties mentioned above plus Argentina, Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, New Zealand, Pakistan and Thailand ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major\\_non-NATO\\_ally](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major_non-NATO_ally)).

The United States also has Status of Forces Agreements with many other states. These agreements determine how US forces can operate in those countries but do not imply a commitment of mutual defense, and may or may not involve commitments of military cooperation ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Status\\_of\\_Forces\\_Agreement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Status_of_Forces_Agreement)).

<sup>3</sup> Parag Khanna, *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order*, New York: Random House (2008).

and a larger market opened to new members. And China proposes protection of national sovereignty (e.g., aid with no strings attached, veto of interferences by the UN Security Council), and a fast growing market.

Khanna points out that we are in a buyer's market: the second-tier powers like to play the three superpowers against each other for maximum advantage. Whether you are government official of Indonesia, Nigeria, or Egypt, you can be friends of the United States, the European Union, and China, as long as you have some tolerance for awkwardness. Meanwhile leaders of the big three embrace each other at the G20 while competing to shape the world to their image.

This multipolar world is fairly safe for now. But it is not stable in the long term. Clouds are gathering on the horizon. Today's cold peace could degenerate into another cold war, especially as China is vying to recover its historical status of dominant power, which the United States is unlikely to willingly relinquish.

It is a cliché that the Obama Administration has inherited a mountain of crises: financial and economic meltdown, climate change, energy, food and water crises, nuclear proliferation, and the hot spots of Afghanistan, Iraq, Gaza and elsewhere. Most of these crises, while acute now, are structural and will strain relations between the three superpowers and among the second-tier powers for the best part of this century.

Meanwhile, multilateralism is facing an uphill battle. Gone are the days when the Quad could present a deal as *fait accompli* to the other members of the World Trade Organization, or when the G8 could cope with a financial crisis alone, or when the Kyoto Protocol could exempt developing countries from commitments to curb greenhouse gas emissions. As the number of countries too big to ignore increases, reaching effective agreements across diverse interests on multiple issues is going to be ever more tantalizing.

Last but not least, nationalism is alive and well despite three decades of globalization and rising cosmopolitanism. The clash between the Muslim and Western worlds is of course most alarming. But chauvinism is also scary in places like China, Russia, Japan and even the United States.

In this context, a foreign policy doctrine for the 21<sup>st</sup> century must seek to solidify friendships without fueling enmities.

The US flexible approach to alliances has clear advantages. Bilateral status of force agreements can be tailor-made, allowing the United States to avoid any more commitments than are necessary to meet specific objectives in each region of the world. Commitments can be easily reverted when circumstances change.

But there is a flipside to flexibility: unpredictability. Deterrence cannot work without credible commitments. Kuwait was rescued but Georgia not. Each state is left guessing whether and under what circumstances it can count on international protection. In doubt, they all play *realpolitik* to court and at the same time undermine the big three superpowers.

The United States likes flexibility regarding aggression as well. While generally accepting that aggression is bad, US Presidents like to maintain some ambiguity regarding the circumstances

in which they would use force, if only not to appear spineless.<sup>4</sup> The United States has a record of using force in other circumstances than self-defense, protecting allies, or UN peacekeeping missions: the operations in Kosovo in 1999 and Iraq in 2003 were technically aggressions and support a perception that America is not a benign power. Iran and North Korea have particular reasons to worry.

My personal views on Iran and North Korea are that the Security Council should increase the costs of nuclear proliferation and delay it through sanctions falling short of the use of force (except perhaps interception and inspection of vessels in the high seas backed by the Security Council). Few countries want the bomb because it is costly. The couple of states determined to get it will get it eventually, unless the United States invades them and changes their regimes. The human, economic, and geopolitical costs of invasion are prohibitive. The alternative, nuclear deterrence, has worked in the past and can work with these regimes as well. Threatening pre-emptive strikes against them is counterproductive: North Korea and Iran know that the last thing President Obama needs is another major war or two, but his refusal to rule them out reinforces enmity and paranoia.

But let me put my opinions on Iran and North Korea aside. It would already be refreshing for President Obama to unambiguously commit not to attack any other states than North Korea and Iran. Such declaration would surely antagonize those two countries. But that side effect could be limited if carefully managed, by avoiding any “Axis of Evil” rhetoric and informing them privately in advance that the declaration does not change US policy toward them in any way. The more important effect of such a declaration would be to reassure the 161 other states that are not currently US allies.

A two-pronged progressive foreign policy doctrine thus emerges:<sup>5</sup>

- (1) Incrementally extend formal military alliance to countries committed to solve international disputes through law rather than force.
- (2) Commit not to attack any country that would choose not to join the alliance unless authorized by the Security Council.

A single multilateral alliance should be preferred over multiple bilateral treaties. NATO itself could form the core of a global alliance by expanding its membership beyond the North Atlantic area. This global defense alliance would be a sort of League of Democracies as advocated by US Presidential candidate McCain, but I argue elsewhere that the alliance ought to adopt a policy of prevention, inclusion, and power-sharing if it is to avoid fostering fear and enmities.<sup>6</sup>

This doctrine synthesizes the three value propositions defined by Khanna. The United States is right to believe that hard power remains the foundation of international relations, and committing the US military to protect other countries is essential for peace.

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<sup>4</sup> “I will not hesitate to use force, unilaterally if necessary, to protect the American people or our vital interests whenever we are attacked or imminently threatened. We must also consider using military force in circumstances beyond self-defense in order to provide for the common security that underpins global stability – to support friends, participate in stability and reconstruction operations, or confront mass atrocities.” Barack Obama in [“Renewing American Leadership”](#), *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2007).

<sup>5</sup> For an elaboration of the progressive foreign policy doctrine, see Jacobs (Op. Cit.), especially its Chapter 13.

<sup>6</sup> Didier Jacobs, “Toward a Progressive Foreign Policy Doctrine”, Forthcoming in: *Journal of New Political Science* (2009).

A global NATO could become a powerful tool to advance the European project of fostering multilateralism and international law.

And a strong pledge not to attack states that do not wish to join the global alliance is a healthy concession to national sovereignty and to the Chinese veto at the Security Council.

If, on the contrary, flexibility and pragmatism in foreign policy are maintained, the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be characterized by dynamic alliances across multiple issues, and some crises might unravel much of the connective tissue that currently binds the international community together.

After the Georgia war in 2008, candidate McCain said he would expel Russia from the G8. He lost the election and President Obama “reset” its relations with Russia. But the Georgia incident demonstrates the fragility of international relations. Tumultuous events could occur in the next twenty years: a collapse of the Chinese economy leading to social upheaval, multiple separatisms, and exacerbated nationalism; another September 11 in the United States; an Israeli attack against Iran; failure of the state in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, etc.

Faced with such turmoil, pragmatism and flexibility in foreign policy are seductive for all nations. But it is also harmful to all. An analogy with the systemic risks of financial markets can be useful here. Given economic uncertainty, each company, investor and consumer hedges their bets and curtails spending and lending, which further fuels the economic collapse. Just as the government needs to intervene to prop up demand, the United States needs to make clear commitments to other countries to anchor expectations and create stability in the world.

At his first inaugural address, President Obama said: “*We will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.*” That was a good place to start.

But I hope that at his second inaugural address he will say:

*“And to all foreigners, we say let us join together in an alliance to build a world of freedom, peace and prosperity. If you choose to join the alliance, you are welcome, whoever you are, as long as you agree to play by the rules. And we say to you: we are ready to die if necessary to protect you. If you prefer not to join the alliance, it’s your choice. But do not fear us. We say to you: we will never attack you unless you attack the alliance first.”*

Basic, but how refreshing for this 21<sup>st</sup> century world thirsty for clarity! At any rate, it would decrease the awkwardness in Shamu’s stadium.