

From a League of Democracies to Cosmopolitan Democracy

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Toward a progressive foreign policy doctrine

What is President Obama's foreign policy compass going to be?

After the debacle of the "Bush doctrine", Democrats can be forgiven for shunning big ideas in favor of pragmatism. Obama will rebrand America, collaborate with other nations to solve global problems like climate change and the financial crisis, but also flex military power to combat terror and nuclear proliferation in places like Pakistan and Iran.

This approach is reminiscent of the Clinton administration. That administration enabled significant advances of multilateralism: World Trade Organization, International Criminal Court, Kyoto Protocol – although the US Senate never ratified the latter two. But it was overrun by events and fell into reactive crisis management mode: failed military intervention in Somalia, lack of intervention in Rwanda, and an intervention in Kosovo that undermined international law, sowed the seeds of discord with Russia, and made the recent Georgia crisis worse than it could have been.

Clinton squandered the opportunity of the end of the Cold War to shape the world with a grand progressive idea. Obama inherits a world that is even more complex and in which America's power is relatively diminished. The situation makes it more difficult to be visionary. And yet it makes it more necessary: America remains the most likely global leader, and leading requires a clear sense of direction.

The grand foreign policy idea of the 2008 elections was defeated. Oddly, it was a bipartisan one. Senator McCain embraced the League of Democracies proposal¹ that had originally been advanced by Democrat-leaning advisors.² The concept is to create a new multilateral body open to democratic governments only, which would "act where the United Nations fail to act", such as stopping the genocide in Darfur.

¹ John McCain, speech at the Los Angeles World Affairs Council (March 26, 2008). See also: Robert Kagan, "The Case for a League of Democracies", *Financial Times*, May 13 (2008).

² Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, "Democracies of the World, Unite", *The American Interest* (Nov/Dec, 2006); G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Forging a World of Liberty Under Law: US National Security in the 21st Century*, (Princeton: The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, 2007).

That idea is basically a synthesis of neo-conservatism and liberal internationalism. Like neo-conservatives, McCain maintained that spreading democracy across the world was the North of his compass and that democracies should not shy away from using force. Like internationalists, he recognized the importance of collaboration and said that, while the United States should try to persuade its allies, it should also “be ready to be persuaded by them”.

The idea has been roundly criticized, and for good reasons: McCain emphasized action at the expense of the United Nations, isolation of Russia and China, and US leadership to the detriment of allies.³

Nevertheless, the League of Democracies contains the germs of a much-needed progressive foreign policy doctrine. We already have a League of Democracies: it is NATO, which should transform itself into a global organization (which would involve changing its name). The progressive doctrine would then consist of three principles that should guide NATO.⁴ They are prevention, inclusion, and power-sharing – the counterpoints of what came across McCain’s message. In the words of Nadia Urbinati in this symposium, these three principles would together move us from a missionary to a normative approach to spreading peace and democracy.

Prevention

NATO is currently an island of peace in an uncertain world. People living within NATO borders are the most secure. It is not surprising that Georgians and Ukrainians want to join in. The progressive doctrine’s goal is to peacefully, incrementally, but intentionally expand that island of peace and security.

NATO is a defensive alliance. Its core proposition is dissuasion. It has protected its member-states without firing a shot for decades (until the Afghanistan war). It is that benign character of NATO that a progressive doctrine underscores.

At the end of the Cold War, experts claimed that NATO was going to go “out of zone, or

³ Thomas Carothers, “A League of Their Own”, *Foreign Policy* Jul/Aug (2008); Thomas Carothers, *Is a League of Democracies a Good Idea?*, (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2008); Gideon Rachman, “Why McCain’s Big Idea Is a Bad Idea”, *Financial Times* (May 5, 2008); Shashi Tharoor, “This Mini-League of Nations would Cause Only Division”, *The Guardian* (May 27 2008).

⁴ The doctrine proposed here builds on ideas presented in Didier Jacobs, *Global Democracy: The Struggle for Political and Civil Rights in the 21st Century* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2007), and www.global-citizens.org.

out of service”. It opted for the former, and transformed itself into an expeditionary force. The new doctrine calls for NATO to go out of zone in another way: by expanding its membership worldwide. The US already offers some defense guarantee to many countries anyway. NATO membership would strengthen the credibility and hence dissuasive power of such guarantees.

Beyond collective self-defense, the North Atlantic Treaty makes it clear that NATO should follow the lead of the UN Security Council. That foundational principle has unfortunately been eroded by both rhetoric and the Kosovo war. Humanitarian interventions and pre-emption of nuclear proliferation are two popular reasons advanced to challenge the Security Council’s authority.

NATO’s intervention in Kosovo not only undermined the Security Council’s authority but also created a legal mess: it is unclear whether Kosovo is a sovereign state given that only a mere forty states have recognized it as such. And Russia has grossly mimicked NATO by recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

That said, the case of Sierra Leone shows that humanitarian interventions can be very helpful in some circumstances – but it also demonstrates that the Security Council can endorse them. The cases of Rwanda, Darfur, or Congo illustrate how costly insufficient action can be – but they are also evidence that the West’s reluctance to engage combat troops in Africa can be as big a stumbling block for humanitarian interventions as the Chinese veto.

As to nuclear proliferation, the foreign policy establishments of Western powers are now united to call a nuclear Iran “unacceptable” and leave all options on the table to avoid it. And yet NATO has experienced the power of dissuasion when facing off the mightier Soviet threat. A nuclear Iran could be dissuaded, too.

Nonetheless, I am not going to resolve the debates on humanitarian interventions and nuclear proliferation in the short space of this article. In its purest form, the progressive doctrine would rule out NATO using force other than in collective self-defense or as authorized by the Security Council (as required by its Charter). That would project a powerful message – a “change we can believe in” – susceptible to sap the realist logic that leads all governments into a cycle of war.

A less pure form of the doctrine would call for the expansion of NATO into a global organization emphasizing its benign dissuasive power, but would allow exceptions to use force against emerging nuclear powers or genocides. That would unavoidably blunt the benign rhetoric and antagonize China, Russia and others, which is what opponents to the idea

of a League of Democracies have emphasized.

However, it is worth noting that these opponents got their targets partially wrong. What alienates Russia and China is primarily the West's willingness to act in spite of their veto at the Security Council. Whether the West acts through NATO (as in Kosovo) or not (as in Iraq) is secondary. Russia and China resent NATO's expansion mostly (though not exclusively) to the extent that NATO asserts the Security Council's role of global policeman, which it should avoid to do.

Inclusion

Far from alienating Russia and China, the second principle of the progressive doctrine is inclusion. It is first about rhetoric and diplomacy. McCain's aggressive rhetoric toward Russia and China undermined the concept he proposed. NATO members should not only be more diplomatic in words, but also in action. They should continue working in good faith within the UN and other universal institutions. The action should continue to take place there. NATO should be about prevention.

Second, the progressive doctrine is not about creating another exclusive club. It is about making an existing exclusive club (NATO) more inclusive.

Third, NATO should not exclude any country from membership: it should simply not force states to join. All countries meeting certain objective membership criteria should be let in if they so choose.

The membership criteria should cover four areas: human rights, peaceful settlement of any outstanding border dispute or other international conflict, minimum defense spending and military preparedness, and collaboration on a range of multilateral agreements tackling security issues such as international terrorism, money laundering, and arms transfer.⁵

The human rights criteria, at the core of the League of Democracies idea, is necessary because defending liberal democracy is the glue that binds NATO members and because strong respect of civil liberties is the best guarantee of civil peace – one would not want to admit members undergoing civil wars (although there are unfortunately precedents). The European Union provides a great model to apply objective human rights criteria to potential members, which then face a strong incentive to clean up their acts before they are admitted in

⁵ Jacobs, *op. cit.*

the club. NATO's admission criteria might not have to be as stringent, but should at least include having conducted several free, fair and competitive national elections.

New members would strengthen NATO by bringing additional military power. On the other hand, they could decrease the alliance's credibility if they eroded the solidarity that strongly binds existing members. Georgia offers an interesting case. Had Georgia been admitted in NATO in spite of its ongoing conflict with Russia, and had Russia attacked it regardless of its new NATO membership, would NATO-nationals have been ready to die for Georgians?

Existing members would not lightly turn away from their treaty obligation because that would undermine their own reliance on NATO protection. Nevertheless, this critical question underscores the importance of the selection criteria and the way they are administered. If applicants went through a rigorous vetting process ensuring they truly are nations striving to internal and external peace, solidarity would be stronger.⁶

Georgia and Ukraine are existing aspirants to NATO. If NATO opened its membership beyond the North Atlantic region, and if it projected itself as a dissuasive force rather than the world's policeman, other countries would be likely to apply. Southeast Asian countries might find NATO valuable to balance a China that could increasingly flex its military muscles in the future. (Right now, they court China to balance the West!)⁷ Mexico and other Latin American countries might want to join the elite club of NATO to increase their influence. Even African countries like Mali or Botswana could meet the membership criteria with some assistance in the not-so-distant future, and would benefit greatly given their unstable neighbourhoods.

Power-sharing

Prevention and inclusion would make the League of Democracies idea more attractive to potential members. Sharing power would help seal the deal.

Carothers (2008) and Daalder and Lindsay (2006) disagree on the ease with which democracies would agree on foreign policies. The latter are right that NATO's experience has demonstrated that democratic governments negotiate well because they trust each other. They can therefore reach compromises easily. While the Iraq war has of course exposed the potential for irreconcilable disagreements on vital questions, serious disagreements would be

⁶ Jacobs, *op. cit.*

⁷ Parag Khanna, *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order* (New York: Random House, 2008).

less likely if NATO were to refocus on its preventive role, following the lead of the Security Council on more sensitive issues like humanitarian interventions and nuclear proliferation.

Nevertheless, Carothers (2008) rightly argues that a larger and more diverse group of countries facing a more complex world could not function in the way North Atlantic allies did during the Cold War, following the lead of the United States. Since indecision and paralysis would be very dangerous for a defense organization, difficulty in reaching consensus could prove fatal to the organization.

As it slowly expands geographically, NATO would therefore need to adopt features of cosmopolitan democracy.⁸ Through a series of incremental institutional reforms, the supranational – as opposed to intergovernmental – character of NATO should be emphasized. This could entail more contested decisions, made by a qualified majority after an open debate in which the minority would make its case but eventually own the majority decision. It would also involve more transparency, more participation of civil society, and more judicial arbitration where it is warranted.

The current lopsided defense spending makes it hard for the United States to share decision-making power within NATO. While voting rights should reflect population, not military power, all alliance members should be held accountable for contributing fairly to the common defense burden. Rebalancing both voice and resources is a bargain that public opinions could accept both in the United States and allied nations.

As argued by Michael Zürn in this symposium, globalization deepens and politicizes intergovernmental organizations. That is true for defense alliances as well as economic institutions. Not only smaller NATO members have long lost self-sufficient military capabilities, but even bigger members can undermine each other's security with foreign policies working at cross purposes. For example, some NATO members complained that the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 fuelled instability and boosted terrorists' recruitment, while the United States suffered from the low legitimacy of its intervention that even its allies criticized. Since all citizens of NATO members are stakeholders in each member's foreign policy, more direct forums of citizen participation are required to debate respective interests, make collective decisions, and hold actors accountable.⁹

⁸ Daniele Archibugi and David Held, eds., *Cosmopolitan Democracy: An Agenda for a New World Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); Daniele Archibugi, David Held and Martin Köhler, eds., *Re-Imagining Political Community: Studies in Cosmopolitan Democracy*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁹ See the essays of Raffaele Marchetti and Terry Macdonald in this symposium.

There is no doubt that such reforms would require a great deal of trust. That is the wager of the preventive foreign policy doctrine. In the end, there will be no sustained global peace and security without overcoming nationalism. In today's world, one cannot expect all UN nations making leaps of faith toward one another. But we could wager that a slowly growing number of democracies with NATO at its core would make that leap of faith, and accept truly joint ownership of their collective defense policy.