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NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: ENGAGEMENT OR PIVOTAL STATES?

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NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: ENGAGEMENT OR PIVOTAL STATES?

"Like Gulliver in Lilliput, the United States risks being tied down by a thousand threads"¹ Walter Mead thus concisely summarizes, I think, the challenges facing the United States in adopting a national security strategy adequate to the task of taking it into the next century. It is in those "thousand threads" that I find the basic flaw of President Clinton's policy of engagement, and why I will argue that the idea of pivotal states, as proposed by Chase, Hill, and Kennedy,² is the preferred organizing concept for U.S. national security strategy.

President Clinton notes that his strategy has three core objectives:

- To enhance our security with effective diplomacy and with military forces that are ready to fight and win
- To bolster America's economic prosperity
- To promote democracy abroad³

He then goes on to list six strategic priorities in support of those objectives, which run the spectrum from fostering democracy in Europe and stability in the Pacific, to participating in the global economy, to promoting peace "from the Middle East to Haiti, from Northern Ireland to Central Africa," to countering "growing dangers" to our security, and, finally, to having the appropriate tools "to meet all these challenges."⁴ The magnitude is striking, and becomes no less so as it is further delineated in the text of A National Security Strategy for a New Century. The overarching premise is that the

¹ Walter Russell Mead, "An American Grand Strategy: The Quest for Order in a Disordered World," World Policy Journal X, (Spring 1993) 11.

² Robert S. Chase, Emily B. Hill, and Paul Kennedy, "Pivotal States and U.S. Strategy," Foreign Affairs 75 (January - February 1996) 33-51.

³ A National Security Strategy for a New Century, (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 1997),

⁴ Ibid., I-II.

United States “ will remain engaged abroad and work with partners, new and old, to promote peace and prosperity ”⁵

A National Security Strategy for a New Century emphasizes regional and transnational threats, as well as threats from weapons of mass destruction, and the importance of old and new relationships around the world to counter these It speaks to a requirement for the nation’s armed forces to serve in multiple capacities, from peacekeeping to major theater wars It cites a necessity to fully participate in the global economy It talks to the environment, to energy, and, of course, to the importance of enlarging democracy ⁶ It is, again, striking by its magnitude and, simultaneously, by its lack of substance and true sense of direction The fact that the document is intended for public consumption does not convince me that it should be so devoid of both My thoughts go back to the “thousand threads ”

Alexander Nacht, writing in 1995, noted that a debate had been ongoing in the United States over the nature of the world that emerged after the end of the cold war “A common theme has been that the United States has moved from a cold war era marked by the containment strategy to a transitional period in which policies have been more reactive than based on some underlying policy concept Developing a foreign policy strategy that is compellingly articulated has been a weak point for the Clinton administration ”⁷

Charles William Maynes, in “Bottom-Up Foreign Policy,” reinforces the point “Neither the ‘new world order’ of the Bush administration nor the Clinton

⁵ Ibid , 1

⁶ Ibid , 5-28

administration's doctrine of democratic and free market 'enlargement' has endured as an organizing concept. As a result, both administrations have repeatedly been driven to a pattern of reactive diplomacy."⁸ He goes on to say that, "Events—and not doctrine—have driven diplomatic responses."⁹

If we concur with Terry Deibel, that "the essence of strategy is choice, its most difficult aspect the setting of priorities",¹⁰ then we clearly need an alternative to a policy of engagement which leaves us at the mercy of a world of a "thousand threads." The concept of pivotal states provides such an alternative.

Chase, Hill and Kennedy define a pivotal state as "a hot spot that could not only determine the fate of its region but also affect international stability."¹¹ They advocate that the United States choose a small number of pivotal states on the basis of large population, key geographic location, economic potential and "capacity to affect regional and international stability." They recognize, like the President, that the world has become, and is becoming, a far different place since the end of the cold war. Communism is no longer a threat, but widespread instability and disorder are. The new enemies are disease, drugs, migration, overpopulation, ethnic strife, degradation of the environment, economic instability and a host of others. U.S. reaction to a regional crisis caused by any of these may very well come too late to prevent significant and long term impacts on the region, the world, and U.S. interests.¹² Pivotal states provides the

⁷ Alexander Nacht, "U.S. Foreign Policy Strategies," The Washington Quarterly 18 (Summer 1995) 196.

⁸ Charles William Maynes, "Bottom-Up Foreign Policy," Foreign Policy 104 (Fall 1996) 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰ Terry L. Deibel, "Strategies Before Containment: Patterns for the Future," International Security 16 (Spring 1992) 81.

¹¹ Chase, Hill, and Kennedy, "Pivotal States and U.S. Strategy," 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, 34-37.

opportunity to be proactive by working with selected nations to preclude crises before they begin, to drive events instead of being driven by them

A strategy of pivotal states offers three distinct advantages over that of engagement. First, Chase, Hill and Kennedy do not argue the core objectives or that the United States must maintain its relationships with Europe, Japan, China and Russia. They also note that the United States has several “special allies,” such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, with whom it must retain ties. They do note, however, that as the nation with the most to lose from global instability, the United States needs a conservative policy which targets pivotal states for assistance. They currently recommend Mexico, Brazil, Algeria, Egypt, South Africa, Turkey, India, Pakistan, and Indonesia. They make a compelling case for each, but caution that the list may change over time as these and other states move along the continuum of development. Second, prioritized commitments overseas would undoubtedly be better understood and accepted by the American public. Third, this strategy would help “bridge the gap” between the old and well understood political and military issues and the new security issues which revolve around the global economy, human rights, and the environment.¹³

Overall, it would be a strategy of choices and priorities, one that would require the United States to take a hard look at the situation around the world, to better define national interests and the resultant threats and opportunities, to establish objectives, and to appropriately allocate means to achieve them. It would be a strategy that channels U.S. resources rather than dilutes them.

¹³ Ibid , 35-37

Chase, Hill and Kennedy caution that a strategy focused on pivotal states will not solve all U S national security problems. However, they believe that "By identifying pivotal states to Congress and the public and providing the greatest possible support to those countries, this strategy has a greater chance of coherence and predictability than vague and indiscriminate assurances of good will to all developing countries, large and small " ¹⁴

I would also argue that the concept of pivotal states meets Terry Deibel's characteristics of good strategy. It is broad-gauged in terms of global reach, it is long-range, or forward looking, it is purposeful, with a focus on specific goals, it is means sensitive, feasible because it channels resources instead of spreading them across the world, it is coherent in that it requires choices based on costs, risks and benefits, it is prioritized, and it is interactive in that it is tuned to the likelihood of intelligent resistance ¹⁵

Engagement promises much but fails both the applied rigor of the framework for strategic thinking-used in seminar and Deibel's characteristics of good strategy. It is certainly broad gauged and forward looking, but falls woefully short by every other measure. It is, in essence, the magnitude of its promise that is its fatal flaw.

The concept of pivotal states rests on making choices – the essence of strategy. The United States can choose engagement, or it can choose not to be tied down by a thousand threads.

¹⁴ Ibid , 51

¹⁵ Terry L. Deibel, "A Design for National Security Strategy," (lecture presented at the National War College, Fort McNair, Washington, D C , 4 September 1997)

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