ENGAGING IRAN AND BUILDING PEACE IN THE PERSIAN GULF REGION

Robert D. Blackwill, Chair

Introduction

We have a very distinguished panel which will help us think about problems in the Middle East. Ray Takeyh is the senior fellow for Middle East studies on the Council on Foreign Relations. Volker Perthes is chairman and director of the German Institute International and Security Affairs. Hitoshi Tanaka is the former Japanese deputy minister of foreign affairs.

I have been asked to make at the outset of this panel broader comments about the current geopolitical situation in general. I was struck by the emphasis by several participants that we are facing the most daunting challenges since Franklin Delano Roosevelt and so forth. It seems to me that there is some danger of endemic pessimism about the future, and it could lead to existential defeatism. There seems to be something of a consensus, or at least a widespread view, that the problems we confront now are the most serious in many, many, many decades. I wonder if that is true, so I am going to be contrarian here for just a few minutes.

After all, there is no prospect today of war between the major powers. Remember Matsu and Quemoy in 1954, the Taiwan crisis of 1995-96, the Berlin crises in the ‘50s and ‘60s and DEFCON 3 in 1973 during the Yom Kippur war. There's no abiding danger to Western vital national interests from Russia. Remember the Red Army sitting astride the center of Europe. There is no threat of a nuclear exchange with civilizational consequences. Remember the Cuban Missile Crisis. There is no danger of major power conflict in the Middle East. Remember Suez, Soviet threats during the 1973 War, and so forth. And there is no superpower confrontation in Africa or Latin America. Remember the surrogate wars from Angola to Central America.

So I wonder if the world is really more dangerous and problematical than at the height of the Cold War, or whether naturally we have normalized that period and, unsurprisingly, are caught up in this one. Moreover, I wonder if the problems we currently face really are intractable, a powerful word used in the meeting. For example, are these problems more intractable than the condition of Western Europe before the Marshall Plan and the creation of NATO? Are they more intractable than U.S.-China relations before the Shanghai Communiqué? U.S.-Soviet relations before “Ospolitik” and Détente? Israel-Egypt relations before the Camp David Agreement and Treaty?

The Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe before the unification of Germany and the liberation of lands
west of the Bug River? The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait before the encompassing international coalition put together for Desert Storm? The chaos in the Balkans before the Dayton Agreement? The Israel-Palestinian issue before the Clinton Administration almost got across the historic finish line in 2000? More intractable than 40 years of U.S.-India acrimony and dispute before the transformation of U.S.-India relations? And so forth.

All these problems and issues I have just enumerated were successfully addressed through what in olden days was called diplomacy—a craft that some people at present seem to believe has been irrevocably lost from human consciousness, an artifact like an Etruscan shard. But why should we necessarily assume that the new American Administration will be overwhelmed by these international problems, systemically incapable of dealing with them?

The military historian, Martin van Creveld, has famously observed that amateurs talk of strategy, and military professionals think logistics. If I may advance, regarding diplomacy, a corollary to that proposition, it is this. Amateurs talk of profound policy formulation and deep conceptual reflection, and statesmen are preoccupied with policy execution. This is a point George Schultz has eloquently made in recent days.

In my view, what is required in successful policy execution is continuing tactical inspiration, which goes beyond linear thinking. Some few folks have this instinctive gift for tactical inspiration, which is almost poetic in character. Henry Kissinger and Bob Zoellick come to mind. All great generals have it, tactical inspiration. Michael Jordan has it. And it is the difference between Vladimir Horowitz playing Schumann, and the local piano teacher working on the same sheets of music. Almost everywhere today, there are, of course, more piano teachers pounding away at the keyboards, than Horowitzes, but that does mean there are no Horowitzes.

In that regard, there will be major differences in practice between the presidential candidates, once they are in office, and how they would think about the problems the U.S. faces, although our political campaign will surely exaggerate the differences between the candidates and assert it is alpha and omega.

I would like in this regard to offer one personal anecdote. When I was working for this President's election campaign in 2000, I from time to time had to debate Madeleine Albright. A formidable debater, I might tell you. She was always effective, and trenchant, and so forth, but she particularly destroyed me on an occasion at which we were before a large audience. Just before we began, Madeleine leaned forward and said quietly to me, "Should I go first and distort your candidate's position, or should you go first and distort mine?" This is happening now in our campaign, and will only accelerate. These policy differences and conceptual differences are important, and they will be discussed over the next several months until November.

But equally, if not more, crucial to the success of the next Administration, in my judgment, is an issue we will not address before the election. That is, how competent a team the new President will put together, and
how compatible will be the world views of these people. Will the foreign policy leaders of the next Administration be amateurs, even if they have served once or more times in previous governments, or seasoned and successful practitioners? I stress practitioners, not theorists. Having spent hundreds of hours in the White House situation room, I do not recall much emphasis there on international relations theory. Or will they be individuals capable of tactical inspiration? I recently came across, in this regard, a relevant quote from Sir Harold Nicolson: "The art of diplomacy, as that of water colors, has suffered much from the fascination which exercises on the amateur."

Incidentally, if I may be somewhat contentious here, I notice that the United States and I do not think this is so true of other governments but you can correct me, has a systemic and bipartisan tendency to return folks to responsible positions in government, indeed to promote them, who failed in their last public policy job. This is like hiring a mechanic again after he ruined your engine in his previous try.

Now let me say a word about American resiliency. This is frequently underestimated by our friends abroad and by some Americans. It is particularly underestimated in the eighth year in a two-term presidency, when everyone in the government is exhausted, and most people who watch the government are exhausted as well from watching it. But I would say this, and I will have some fun with this, and I know it is an exaggeration, but I think it makes the point. Sometimes I think that our European friends do not solve problems that they tried to solve 50 years ago because they remember they tried to solve them and failed. And American Administrations solve problems that they tried to solve five years ago and failed, because they do not remember that they tried to solve them five years ago. This produces historical penalties to be paid, this lack of historical memory, but I do think it also contributes to the resiliency of the American polity.

As we look forward to 2009, perhaps we can remember John Kennedy's wise words, "So let us begin anew, remembering that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof," which I have always thought was a good admonition.

Of course, when you are out of power, and I can speak personally about this, you tend to think you can do everything once you get there, and of course you cannot. My principal worry in this regard is that the next Administration, no matter what its representatives say now, will devote too little attention to Asia and to the rise of Chinese power. This is, and should be, a special concern to our friends in Asia, where there is widespread strategic unease about the region and America's role in it. I assume this will be a serious topic of discussion next year at our Trilateral Commission plenary in Tokyo.

Finally, for the next Administration will be the Greater Middle East: Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, the Middle East peace process, Syria, Lebanon, radical Islam and terrorism, how to deal with Hamas and Hezbollah, the future of moderate Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Nearing the end of my comments, I do want to say one word about Pakistan. In my view, it is the epicenter of international terrorism today. I am just back from that region two nights ago. Nobody knows
what will happen in Pakistan, with its dozens of nuclear weapons, in the period ahead. There is a real danger, if not a probability, of the Coalition of NATO forces coming apart in Afghanistan over the medium term if the trends do not improve. In that regard, in my judgment there is no prospect of any conceivable Pakistan government for the foreseeable future acting strongly against the Jihadis, al Qaeda, and the Taliban, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas along the Afghan border. The new Pakistan government and the chief of staff of the army, General Kayani, former director of Inter-Services Intelligence, talk about suppressing the terrorists inside Pakistan on what sounds like a global warming timeline. If this is the case, and the Pakistan government will not act against the terrorists, I would assert we cannot win in Afghanistan even if U.S. and NATO troops are substantially increased. The terrorists within the Pakistan sanctuary will improve systemically their infrastructure, their training, and their terrorist power projection. If that happens, it will only be a matter of time before they come in a big way to the American homeland to try and kill us massively again.

And last, Iran. Of course we all want a negotiated sensible outcome to the crisis with Iran over its nuclear program, but if such a diplomatic solution is found not to be possible, and the next American President faces a binary choice between acquiescing to an Iranian nuclear weapons capability and trying to deal with it, or attacking Iran's nuclear facilities, which should it be?

Ken Duberstein, to his credit, has made clear that John McCain would be very inclined to use military force after, of course, trying everything one could think of diplomatically. No matter how much diplomatic ingenuity is applied here by the next Administration on issues concerning Iran, and we hope it will be a great deal, I think those of us at this meeting can think about worst case scenarios. In that context, it is my impression, and my European friends may correct me, that if faced with that binary choice, most Europeans would turn John McCain's aphorism on its head and say the only thing worse than Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon is for the United States to attack Iran.

I sense that there is a consensus, since no one spoke against it and I certainly share it, that the new Administration in Washington should enter into, as quickly as is prudent, comprehensive negotiations with Tehran, including concerning its nuclear activities. And second, that there is a difference of view among us about the consequences of the Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons, the consequences for the region, and the implications for the international system.

Robert D. Blackwill is a senior fellow at the RAND Corporation and former U.S. deputy national security advisor for strategic planning and presidential envoy to Iraq.