**Rethinking US Grand Strategy and Foreign Policy**

*Seminar Series*

18 February 2010

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*US National Interests*

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**Note:** 1. Below are informal notes taken by a JHU/APL staff member at the Seminar.

   2. Information in the handouts Dr. Allison mentioned in his talk can be found in the notes below, the downloadable viewgraphs and in the Executive Summary of the 2000 *Commission on America’s National Interests*

Dr. Allison began by saying that he had been impressed by the seriousness of the focus of this year’s Rethinking Seminar Series and was intrigued by the idea of rethinking national interests at this time. He had been involved in the in-depth studies of America’s national interests in both 1996 and 2000. The report from the 2000 Commission is available from the Belfer Center [website](https://www.belfercenter.org/). Dr. Allison was one of the Commission’s Executive Directors along with Dimitri Simes of the Nixon Center and James Thomson of Rand. A very distinguished group of Americans came together to think about US national interests. They started with no presumptions, beginning by clearly identifying what was involved in an American national interest.

The Commission considered:
- What elements determine what is vital
- What factors are involved in prioritizing those vital interests
- What trends were evident about vital interests and what might be changing

A concrete example – President Obama’s West Point speech
- “…it is in our vital national interest to send an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan”
- We could discuss whether this is a vital interest
- If it is, why is it?

Take-aways or propositions from tonight’s talk
1. We need to understand American vital interests to have a sound foundation for sustaining American foreign policy
2. There is a hierarchy of American national interests
   - Clarity demands that current leaders and the public think harder about foreign policy than we did in the Cold War
   - We have not done well thinking about this in the last 20 years
   - What regions/interests should we care about now?
     - Afghanistan? the Middle East? China?
     - The value of Chinese currency? The threat of WMD?
     - International criminals? Drugs? Climate issues? Human rights?
• We probably should care about all those things, but what should we care about the most?
  o Some things do matter more than others
  o Americans are not good at identifying hierarchies
• The Commission’s account of national interests is deliberately sparse, using a set of four columns to parse the various interests
  o Vital National Interests
  o Extremely Important National Interests
  o Important National Interests
  o Less Important National Interests
    ▪ All interests listed were considered important but some were more than others
3. It is not clear how today’s leaders and public will meet the need for clarity about national interests
• A review of recent writings on this topic shows that we have not moved very far from what the 2000 Commission listed
• There is also no consensus on current national interests
  o Lists with 100 Vital Interests show no prioritizing
• Example: List of 100 included the territorial integrity of Canada
  o How Vital is that really?
  o It would be to Canada but not to the US
  o What if Quebec and the western regions broke off?
    ▪ Would probably be better for US in NAFTA to work with 3 weaker countries
    ▪ US might pick up another state or two to join Alaska to the Lower 48
• Another example: Climate concerns as discussed in Copenhagen
  o An alliance of 43 small island states had vital concerns about sea levels
    ▪ They believed if carbon in the atmosphere rose to 450 parts/million the world’s average temperature would probably raise 2°C, raising sea level and swamping them
    ▪ Tuvalu is mostly below 2 meters above sea level
    ▪ This Alliance wanted the target to ensure 1.5°C limit to protect them
    ▪ So this would be vital interest to those countries
  o This is not a vital interest to the US
    ▪ As human beings we should care about the people; help them move if needed
    ▪ Worry about the inhabitants as people, not as a country
• It will be hard to determine how to prioritize interests
  o Different people will want to uphold different interests
  o Might relate to where they come from or where they would like to see preserved

The remainder of this talk will cover
1. Principles used by the 2000 Commission in their thinking about vital American interests
2. How the interests fall into different columns (vital / extremely important/ just important / less important)
3. Nuclear terrorism – some elements of agreement on the threat

Principles of the Commission on America’s National Interests
• To set priorities it is necessary to establish some sort of a hierarchy of interests
  o A set of four columns works well
• The Commission insisted that the definition of vital must be that found in the dictionary
“essential to the existence” of something
Government officials tend to use vital to mean what happens to be important to them
  • An occupational hazard
Terms used may actually be different than how thinking actually works
The basis for identifying interests was NSC 68 in which the US core interest was identified as preserving the US as a free country with its fundamental values and institutions intact
  • There was an interest in updating this concept
  • Should also involve the maintenance of international conditions that would allow the US to survive as a free country with its fundamental values and institutions intact
Recognition of an analytic connection between national interests and what needs to be done to advance those national interests
  • They are not the same thing
  • They often get confused when talking about interests
  • US does not really need to worry about having a hostile hegemon on its borders
    • Such a threat is not likely from Canada or Mexico
Interests are not just what the current Administration says they are
  • A given interest may be vital but saying so does not make it so
  • Countries sometimes fail to see what is in their vital interests
Beyond the basic core of realistic interests there are further layers of interests or interpretations of interests
The question of “Is NATO a vital interest now?” could be discussed
  • NATO certainly addresses a vital interest involving avoiding the collapse of Europe but is not itself a vital interest
Interests are separate from what we are willing to do to protect those interests
  • We may have an interest that is not the equivalent of what we are willing to do advance that interest
  • There is a spectrum of responses from fighting, to committing troops, to lesser options
Treaty obligations are indicators of vital national interests
  • Example: the concept of an attack on one is an attack on all
  • International agreements signal a judgment about interests
Interests and values may be at odds
Henry Kissinger (Dr. Allison’s early professor at Harvard) wrestled with the conundrum for 900 pages (but did not resolve) the problem
Compare Woodrow Wilson’s idealism to Teddy Roosevelt’s realism
One way around it is to use the weasel-word terms of “subtle and complex”

The summary of national interests established by the 2000 Commission reflect the best judgments of those who could agree
  • Tried to be unambiguously
  • May be wrong but at least they are clear

Categorization of National Interests
The following text boxes were adapted from Dr. Allison’s viewgraphs.
**Vital National Interests:**

Conditions that are **strictly necessary** to safeguard and enhance Americans’ survival and well-being in a free and secure nation.

**Vital US national interests are to:**

1. Prevent, deter, and reduce the threat of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons attacks on the United States or its military forces abroad;
2. Ensure US allies’ survival and their active cooperation with the US in shaping an international system in which we can thrive;
3. Prevent the emergence of hostile major powers or failed states on US borders;
4. Ensure the viability and stability of major global systems (trade, financial markets, supplies of energy, and the environment); and
5. Establish productive relations, consistent with American national interests, with nations that could become strategic adversaries, China and Russia.

Instrumentally, these vital interest will be enhanced and protected by promoting singular US leadership, military and intelligence capabilities, credibility (including a reputation for adherence to clear US commitments and even-handedness in dealing with other states), and strengthening critical international institutions—particularly the US alliance system around the world.

- Vital means strictly necessary so there are only 5
- In #3: ensuring allies’ survival is not the same as ensuring that allies would not be attacked
- Importance of #4 can be seen in the recent financial meltdowns

**Extremely Important National Interests:**

Conditions that, if compromised, would **severely prejudice but not strictly imperil** the ability of the US government to safeguard and enhance the well-being of Americans in a free and secure nation.

**Extremely important US national interests are to:**

1. Prevent, deter, and reduce the threat of the use of nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons anywhere;
2. Prevent the regional proliferation of WMD and delivery systems;
3. Promote the acceptance on international rules of law and mechanisms for resolving or managing disputes peacefully;
4. Prevent the emergence of a regional hegemony in important regions, especially the Persian Gulf;
5. Promote the well-being of US allies and friends and protect them from external aggression;
6. Promote democracy, prosperity, and stability in the Western Hemisphere;
7. Prevent, manage, and, if possible at reasonable cost, end major conflicts in important geographic regions;
8. Maintain a lead in key military-related and other strategic technologies, particularly information systems;
9. Prevent massive, uncontrolled immigration across US borders;
10. Suppress terrorism (especially state-sponsored terrorism), transnational crime, and drug trafficking; and
11. Prevent genocide.
• It is possible to discuss what category some items fall into
• The concept of the use of one nuclear anywhere needs to be thought about more
  o Even if one nuclear weapon went off in Mumbai or London, our way of life would be changed dramatically
  o Perhaps this should be moved up to the Vital category
• Some interests get a great deal of press activity which make them look important
  o Example: #11 Preventing genocide might be moved up to vital, but
  o There has been a genocide in Rwanda but it did not alter American way of life
  o However, it is still a very important interest as a matter of humanity

Important National Interests:
Conditions that, if compromised, would have major negative consequences for the ability of the US government to safeguard and enhance the well-being of Americans in a free and secure nation.

Important US national interests are to:
1. Discourage massive human rights violations in foreign countries;
2. Promote pluralism, freedom, and democracy in strategically important states as much as is feasible without destabilization;
3. Prevent and, if possible at low cost, end conflicts in strategically less significant geographic regions;
4. Protect the lives and well-being of American citizens who are targeted or taken hostage by terrorist organizations;
5. Reduce the economic gap between rich and poor nations;
6. Prevent the nationalization of US-owned assets abroad;
7. Boost the domestic output of key strategic industries and sectors;
8. maintain and edge in the international distribution of information to ensure that American values continue to positively influence the cultures of foreign nations;
9. Promote international environmental policies consistent with long-term ecological requirements; and
10. Maximize US GNP growth from international trade and investment.

Instrumentally, the important US national interests are to maintain a strong UN and other regional and functional cooperative mechanisms.

• These interests are also referred to as “Just Important”
• Items on this list do matter a lot, just not as much as other items on the earlier lists
• If the US left Afghanistan, would there be great harm in human rights violations there?
  o Yes, but the harm would not be vital to US interests
  ▪ Maybe it should be seen as such
  ▪ President Bush considered this vital and acted on that belief
• At the same time there has been a conflict going on in the Congo
  o 4 million have been killed in the last 15 years
  o US should be concerned about this, too, but it is not a vital US interest
• When Americans get killed or captured elsewhere around the world, it is an important and horrible event – but not vital
Less Important or Secondary National Interests:
Conditions that are not unimportant. They are important and desirable conditions, but ones that have little direct impact on the ability of the US government to safeguard and enhance the well-being of Americans in a free and secure nation.

Less important or secondary US national interests include:
1. Balancing bilateral trade deficits;
2. Enlarging democracy everywhere for its own sake;
3. Preserving the territorial integrity or particular political constitution of other states everywhere; and
4. Enhancing exports of specific economic sectors.

- Less Important does not equal unimportant
- As humans we should be concerned about all of these things but they are not vital US interests

The 4-column approach is not a bad way to think about the hierarchy of American interests
- A 20-column system would involve too many categories
- A 3-column system would probably work, too
- What is essential is the clear identification of the definition for each column

Nuclear Terrorism as the Greatest Current Threat
- Presidents Obama and Bush actually agree that the greatest threat today could come from nuclear weapons in the hands of terrorists
- A nuclear 9/11 would definitely change the world
- Such an event may also be a tipping point in nuclear proliferation

Viewgraphs include nuclear effects target charts for both New York City and Washington, DC
- In October 2001 the CIA heard from a source called Dragonfire that a 10-ton nuclear bomb would be set off in NYC
  - Material had come from Russian stockpiles
  - Small enough to fit in an SUV so it could be driven to Times Square
  - Slightly less powerful than the Hiroshima bomb
- Reports were considered credible but turned out to be wrong
- Viewgraph shows the likely levels of devastation
  - Red circle indicates what would be completely destroyed
  - Blue circle indicates areas that would be heavily damaged and contaminated
- Would similar bombs elsewhere in the world also cause a major change in American life?
Two propositions about the inevitability of such a nuclear attack on a city

Proposition #1: It is inevitable
- Some believe that there is a greater than even chance for such attack by 2014
- A similarly disruptive biological attack could happen in 5 years
- Even Warren Buffet believes that such an attack is inevitable
- There is even mathematical way of showing this prediction
  - If there is even a 10% chance a year, in a few years the probability will reach 99%

Proposition I: Inevitable (2)

**Warren Buffett:**

“It’s inevitable. I don’t see any way that it won’t happen.”

"If the chance of a weapon of mass destruction being used in a given year is 10 percent and the same probability persists for 50 years, the probability of the event happening at least once during that 50 years is 99.5 percent. Thus the chance of getting through the 50-year period without a disaster is 0.51 percent — just slightly better than one in 200."
To look at this nearly unanimous view that nuclear terrorism is the worst threat currently facing the world we must think through:

- Who could be planning a nuclear terrorist attack?
- What nuclear weapons could terrorists use?
- Where could terrorists acquire a nuclear bomb?
- When could terrorists launch the first nuclear attack?
- How could terrorists deliver a nuclear weapon to its target?

Proposition #2: It is preventable
- If we take actions to drop the threat to 1% a year rather than 10%, we get many more years before reach inevitable
- How to prevent a nuclear weapon from being used
  - No “loose nukes”
  - No new nascent nuclear weapons – no new capabilities such as Iran’s purification improvements
  - No new nuclear states – already have about 8 and a half
    - Should stop there
    - Don’t go beyond North Korea

President Obama’s Prague speech in April 2009 sets out some of these steps
- Reduce role of nuclear weapons in the US security structure
- President will discuss threat with 42 heads of state in an upcoming nuclear security strategy summit
- World should secure nuclear materials to a gold standard
- Negotiations on new nuclear agreements are about to be announced

Dr. Allison’s book *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* discusses these issues in greater depth
- Warren Buffet, who knows something about risk and preventing it, name it Book of the Year

Returning to an earlier point: Dr. Allison does not agree with the President’s West Point speech about sending troops to Afghanistan – it is not a vital American interest

**QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION**

Permanent Interests
- Involve conditions that are necessary for the survival of the country
- But which conditions depend on developments in the world
- The 2000 Commission considered including climate change as an issue
  - Small amounts of climate change would not be a big enough issue
- However, some radical changes in conditions might reach the level of vital interests
  - If air quality was so bad that Americans could not breathe
  - If mean temperature rose enough to increase sea level that half the country was under water
Moving to Zero on Nuclear Weapons

- It would be hard to get to zero nuclear weapons in the world
- Dr. Allison’s mid-80s book considered the concept
  - Concluded that the idea would be infeasible and destabilizing
- But since four senior political thinkers recently endorsed the idea, it would be useful to reconsider it
  - Kissinger, Schultz, Nunn, and Perry endorsed the concept
  - Their views usually would win out over those of anyone else
  - Nunn’s view: the US would be better off without nuclear weapons because we are so much stronger than everyone else in other fields
  - Non-nuclear nations would feel safe from what rogue Superpower could do
- Problem: it is impossible to dis-invent nuclear weapons
- Best argument for working toward doing away with all nuclear weapons:
  - Consider zero nuclear weapons as the top of the mountain
  - We can’t see the top from our current position near the bottom
  - Maybe once we climb above the clouds we will be able to see the way to the summit/zero nuclear weapons
  - Bottomline: We may not be able to see the summit now, but we do know the direction
  - Problem: in the short term we need to fear avalanches
    - If North Korea and/or Iran break through, they could set off a proliferation avalanche among their neighbors
    - Or worse if their governments fall apart and the loose nukes situation occurs
- The four sages’ response would be: If the US and Russia show leadership toward zero nuclear weapons…
  - It won’t change the minds of anyone in North Korea or Iran
  - It might change the minds of others who would be more willing to build a system of regimes to control North Korea and Iran

Afghanistan

- The US has an extremely important (nearly vital) interest in eliminating global terrorist who planned the 9/11 attack and want to do a 9/11+ attack (basically, Al Qaeda, et al)
- Most are not now in Afghanistan but in the ungoverned areas of Pakistan
- The US should go there to get them

Biological Weapons

- Current biological revolution and gene modification advances will be the driver for the first half of the 21st century as nuclear weapons drove security issues of the last half of the 20th
- What would happen if someone managed to cross small pox and the Ebola virus?
  - Where would it stop?
- This is a very worrisome task to consider the issues related to this threat

Complex Issues

- Every issue may connect to many other issues, but some connect with issues that are more important
- Example: climate change
  - Best estimates indicate that 450 parts/million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere will likely increase the earth’s temperature by 2°
• This is a bigger problem for some countries than for others
  • Another issue is how long it will take for that increase to occur
    o If this is occurring, there are a lot of issues to be addressed
      • But the linkages between the issues may not be tight
• For the equally complex situation in Afghanistan it is hard to identify what is most important
  o Improving the governance?
  o Growing poppies?
  o Improving the schools?
• While all of these issues are important to Afghanistan, how important are they to the US
  o Having good schools is important
  o But they can’t be more important in Afghanistan than elsewhere

Vital Interests
• The US may have a vital interest in the stability of the global financial system
  o But that does not mean that we will send an army to fight for it
• If there is another Great Depression, how damaging would that be to core US values?
• If something is a vital interest, we must do whatever is necessary to ensure it happens the right way
  o Sometimes we may have to fight
  o Sometimes we may have to take other actions
• Taiwan is a good example
  o We could start over with no treaties
  o Taiwan is a very successful and “nice” country
  o On the other hand, China is a huge country with lots of US interests
  o Nixon decided he was willing to sell out Taiwan to establish relations with China
  o Current treaties say that the US is prepared to support Taiwan
    • Does not say that the US would fight for them
    • This is about the right level of interest given the situation

US Understanding of Other Cultures
• Americans are really not very good at it
  o Rather like businessmen who can’t sell to cultures outside their own
• Example: the handling of North Korea over the last few years has been appalling
  o Start with the announcement of the Axis of Evil threesome
    • Then US knocked off one of those regimes
  o North Korean regime’s response was: if we give up our nuclear weapons, it would be the equivalent of committing suicide
    • So I’ll keep my nuclear weapons and you pay me to come to talks
    • Even if the US did not pay, others were willing to
  o US stated that their primary interest was changing the regime
    • That was already the regime’s greatest fear
  o China really doesn’t care about a million refugee problem, given the size of its overall population
    • China fought the Korean War to keep the US away from its border
    • Now we are asking them to help us do just that
• In both the China and North Korean situations, the US is proposing just the opposite of what those countries see as their vital interests
President Obama’s West Point Speech on Additional Troops for Afghanistan

- In listening to the speech, can tell that the President nearly swallowed the line about vital US interests in Afghanistan as a reason for sending troops there
- Also, President does not say what that vital interest actually is
- The decision to send troops to Afghanistan has been debated in the press
  - There has been no discussion about whether we have a vital interest there or not
- Two possible viewpoints on vital interests could be:
  - Not permitting any sanctuary for global terrorism to grow
    - But terrorists are really now more in ungoverned Pakistan
  - Not allowing the unraveling of Afghanistan to start the unraveling of Pakistan
    - US does have vital interest in making sure that Pakistan government does not fail, creating the loose nuclear weapons situation

Israel and Iran

- The US has limited means to change things in Iran or Israel
- Can’t just keep stating objectives without having any means to enforce decisions
  - Iran has crossed at least 6 red lines that Israel said they must not
  - Example: improved technical issues like enriching uranium to a certain level
- US options are not good
  - Another round of US sanctions/etc. is possible
  - But can expect no great change in effectiveness
- Israel will get excited eventually
  - When will depend more on internal Israeli politics, rather than Iranian move
- Tracking China’s trade with Iran and the strength of sanctions show parallel lines
  - Sanctions are nearly always a trade promotion opportunity for China
  - Any business with Iran dropped by other countries is picked up by China
    - Often at very favorable terms
- Israel would consider attacking Iran if they felt that they had found all of nuclear-related targets
  - Very hard to do
  - Can’t be sure that you have found all of them
  - Iran probably has a growing number of hidden facilities

US Mistakes in the Past

- US made huge mistakes in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the 1990s
- US did little in return for attacks on the World Trade Center in 1993, the USS COLE, the African embassies, etc.
- Yes, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan was terrible
  - But there are lots of terrible regimes in the world
  - Afghanistan was special because it became the sanctuary for Al Qaeda
- Failure of the government in Afghanistan was not a vital interest to the US
  - What if Al Qaeda had been hiding in Bonn or Hamburg?
- There are 40-50 places in the world that are ungoverned where Al Qaeda could hide
- Al Qaeda should be moved out of any place where they might be finding sanctuary
• Bottomline: US really should focus on the terrorists rather than territory

Open Access
• Historically, the US has sought to have open access around the world for global business reasons especially
• Having access allows the conditions required to maintain the situation that US wants for itself
  o Therefore, open access throughout the world becomes a vital interest

National Interests
• The hardest questions to answer:
  o How to categorize national interests
  o How to prioritize national interests

National Interests that Go Beyond the Survival of the Country
• In the Cold War we had the MAD (mutually assured destruction) doctrine, but is there an equivalent now?
• Start with recognition that we are thinking from an ethno-centric American point of view
  o In the Cold War we had “Better Dead than Red” concept
  o Hard to think of an equivalent situation now
• In the Cold War discussed things like: What if 20 or 30 nuclear weapons went off?
  o Was it then time to kill all the Soviets?
  o Were we expecting them to kill all of us in return?
• No President ever got to thinking this through to a decision point
  o Kissinger never decided how he would advise a President on such a question
• Can’t think of any analogous threat for the current day
• What would happen if China came to rule the world?
  o Would we like that any better than if the Soviets had won?
  o Looking at potential competitors today, hard to see any better than the US
  o Americans would be unwilling to give up their institutions and values