A POLICY OPTION?

The end of the Cold War has raised doubt among some in Washington that the concern for American activism on the world scene will diminish significantly. Indeed, during the days of the Cold War, the American people were made to realize that communism presented a threat to American interests as well as to the American way of life. Such a threat meant that the US could not shy away from its international commitments. Now, however, with the dissolution of what once constituted the primary threat to the United States for nearly five decades, the prospect of convincing the US public of a need for continued international activism becomes less defensible.¹ For the American public, success or failure of its elected officials is usually measured in how well they perform during crises. Convincing them to subscribe to a policy, the effects of which will likely not be felt for years, if at all, would be difficult. However, proactive policy measures should not be so quickly discounted. Policy, it is said, cannot operate within a vacuum. And while most policy is meant to ‘counterbalance the prevailing trends of a given time’,² proactive policy may allay the possibility of crisis and protect interests in the long term. Cynics may claim that this will not win votes for elected officials. Should this mean then that the adoption of a comprehensive strategy of foreign policy should be abandoned so that only success in relation to crises situations can continue to justify the self-aggrandizement of public officials? Most likely, not.

The end of the Cold War has instead placed the United States once again at the crossroads of policy formulation. The Bush and Clinton administrations may have recognized the dynamics of the international system, yet they have done little by way of strategy formulation. The problem, however, may not lie exclusively in policy adoption, but rather in a step which should precede it, interest identification. Such a process requires that the US reassess its interests across the globe and be able to assign a level of priority to them. This would attach the proper weight to interests and hence aid in determining
the degree of sacrifice necessary to protect them. Such a process must, however, also realize that the significance of one or more particular interests can change, given time and/or the dynamics of the situation under certain circumstances.

INTEREST RECOGNITION

Vital or strategic interests are those which most observers would claim involve the direct safety, security and sovereignty of the United States. Critics contend that the pursuit of ends beyond the boundaries of vital interests, such as promoting democracy or stability, would only serve to weaken America. However, if we are to assume that vital American interests outside the physical security of the United States can also affect the US, then goals such as stability promotion should not simply be aspired towards, but actively pursued, particularly in the post-Cold War era. Democratization has shown that it will require time to develop and prosper. In Eastern Europe, reversion to more authoritarian forms of governance are already visible. The short term requires that stability promotion in key areas should perhaps be pursued rather than shunned as an outdated method of the Cold War. American interests in Western Europe, the Middle East and Asia have shown recently that regional events do affect regional allies. The US cannot simply turn its back on these circumstances which are likely to negatively affect American interests in the long term. Two factors, however, should be outlined in regards to such an approach. First, practicality dictates that the United States cannot unilaterally respond to crisis situations across the globe. Second, the US should not limit itself to the support of those states and leaders which, on their face, are simply pro-US. The Cold War unfortunately forced hard choices upon the United States to support those which, although anti-communist, by their very rule destroyed, perverted, and simply ignored the most basic principles of democracy the US upholds. This is not to imply a sense of moral righteousness on the part of the US. To do so would highlight past US policy hypocrisy. More importantly, to anchor oneself literally to the statement would also demonstrate the contradiction in the principles of democracy promotion with stability promotion. Instead, it should be realized