



DCFR ON THE RECORD

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Prioritizing the Obama Foreign Policy Agenda

The Dallas Committee on Foreign Relations is pleased to present the third edition of DCFR on the Record, an occasional publication featuring interviews by executive director Amanda Schnetzer with selected guest speakers. This issue features Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft, former U.S. national security advisor, who addressed DCFR members and guests at our annual holiday dinner on December 2, 2008. Ms. Schnetzer and Gen. Scowcroft met separately to discuss foreign policy priorities for the new administration of President Barack Obama. The views they express are their own. The Dallas Committee on Foreign Relations takes no institutional positions.

When Barack Obama took the oath of office in January 2009, an expansive list of policy challenges awaited him in the Oval Office. At home, President Obama faced a major financial crisis: markets were crashing, businesses failing, home values plummeting, and individual fortunes being lost. Abroad, he found multiple tests of America's global supremacy: a resurgent Russia, an irascible Iran, a rising China, and struggles with extremism in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, to name a few.

According to Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft, who helped guide U.S. foreign policy through the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, China's crackdown on democracy activists in Tiananmen Square, and the first U.S. war with Iraq, "One of the most difficult jobs that a president has is setting his priorities. At the top you can only concentrate on a certain number of things at a time." Some issues are important. Some are immediate. Some are both.

In this final category, Scowcroft places revival of the Palestinian peace process, which he believes President Obama should make his chief foreign policy concern. "We have to continue in Iraq. We have to continue in Afghanistan," he acknowledges. "But we also could do more....The United States needs to be assertive in a way it never has."

In Scowcroft's view, presidential involvement is the key ingredient to a renewed Palestinian peace process. "By the end of the Clinton administration, the two sides had come very close to an agreement on most of the issues," he began. "But President Clinton left office, Arafat said no, and the whole thing fell apart."

While acknowledging Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's efforts in the region and President George W. Bush's bold call for a Palestinian state, Scowcroft feels presidential involvement in the peace process was largely missing during the Bush years and that the administration failed to follow through. "Both the Palestinians and the Israelis have weak governments, and they are not able to sit down together and reach agreement alone."

Scowcroft commends the Bush administration for developing the Road Map to settle the Israel-Palestine conflict and assembling the Quartet negotiating group of the United States, Russia, European Union, and United Nations. He believes, however, that the Road Map's initial emphasis on security hindered progress. "Any guy with a mortar or satchel bomb could stop the process...and that's what happened."

To address Israeli concerns that they cannot withdraw from the occupied territories due to the lack of security, Scowcroft believes "you could offer a NATO



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force to move [in] as Israeli forces pull back. NATO could occupy the territory and train the Palestinian forces to provide their own security, which they can't do now. That would be a new element." The other new element, in Scowcroft's view, would be a United States that says more than just "we're providing the table, you guys sit down and come to an agreement." Instead, since the outlines of agreement are already "pretty obvious to everybody," the United States should say "This is what we're proposing you do. Any changes you can make and agree together, fine." It might not work, Scowcroft concedes, but he thinks it would.

To Withdraw or Not to Withdraw from Iraq. While standing by his conviction that the war in Iraq was a "diversion from the war on terrorism," Scowcroft took issue with Mr. Obama's calls during the presidential campaign for a rigid timetable on the exit of U.S. forces. Instead, Scowcroft believes the United States should assist the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in achieving a level of stability that allows a meaningful drawdown of U.S. forces.

In his latest book, *America and the World*, Scowcroft challenges coauthor and fellow former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski on the same point. Mr. Brzezinski "thinks our presence there is part of the problem." Not so, says Scowcroft. "[O]ur goal ought to be to achieve an Iraq which is an element of stability in a very turbulent region, not a force for chaos and conflict. You can't do that by the calendar. You have to nurture them. You have to develop their armed forces so they can maintain security themselves. As they do better, we can start to withdraw our forces."

Ratified by Iraq's parliament in November 2008, the country's new Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the United States provides for a complete withdrawal of the U.S. military by the end of 2011. Scowcroft describes the new pact as "mainly a political document serving both sides." In Iraq, he says, it serves the needs of both Shia and Sunni politicians. The Shias "want us out because they are the majority who think it's their turn to run Iraq. The Sunnis want us to stay, because they are the minority and want the protection while they regain their strength." With adoption of the agreement "each side was playing to its own domestic

audience." In its final form, the SOFA makes allowances for a separate deal to extend the U.S. presence if and when necessary, underscoring Scowcroft's position that a secure and stable Iraq—not the withdrawal of U.S. troops—should be our goal.

Globalization Changes Everything. When asked about the global economic downturn, Scowcroft noted his belief that the United States has not yet "come to grips with a world that has been transformed dramatically since the end of the Cold War. We're only vaguely realizing this," he concludes. "Globalization is changing everything. The way we think, the way we act. National borders have eroded, and we've got to adjust to that." In fact, Scowcroft believes the current crisis "might just be a blessing in the sense that it has made us realize how much the world has changed—that economically we are really one world. A crisis that now happens in one place spreads almost immediately to the rest of the world."

In Scowcroft's view, a number of established organizations are out of place in this new global landscape. The Bretton Woods institutions, for example, are inadequate to deal with the changed circumstances of a globalized economy. Most other domestic and multilateral institutions were built for Cold War purposes. In the United States, the National Security Act of 1947 established the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Council "for a world that has disappeared." "NATO is a wonderful military alliance," he continues, "but what's it for? The purpose for which it was organized is gone. The United Nations was also put together for a world that no longer exists."

The November 2008 meeting of the G20 group of industrialized and emerging market nations may have been a step in the right direction. "It didn't accomplish much," Scowcroft admits of the Washington gathering, "but it was an attempt to understand what was going on and to search for new global mechanisms to deal with a very new economic situation."

Certainly worth noting was the affirmation of world leaders that "market principles, open trade and investment regimes, and effectively regulated financial markets foster the dynamism, innovation, and



entrepreneurship...essential for economic growth, employment, and poverty reduction.” When the G20 gathers in London on April 2, 2009, observers will be watching to see whether the same leaders reiterate their commitment to eschew protectionism in favor of free trade and open markets, or whether cracks in the global consensus have emerged.

In a related vein, Scowcroft takes issue with President Obama’s support for ending tax benefits for American companies that outsource jobs. “Since the Cold War, large international businesses have reorganized...They buy parts over here, some raw materials over there, and services over here. That is more efficient and produces greater global wealth.” Despite the fact that this shift “produces dislocations” and “puts people out of work,” Scowcroft firmly believes “the solution is not to stop that from happening but to make the adjustment for the people who are hurt.”

Reining in Resurgent Russia. Given his contributions to the collapse of Soviet communism, I took a moment to ask Scowcroft about the prospects for Russia to become a “responsible stakeholder” in international affairs—a phrase former deputy secretary of state Robert Zoellick coined to describe our desired use of China’s global power and influence.

“Russia is farther away from becoming a responsible stakeholder than the Chinese are,” he replied. “But we have overlooked what they went through as a result of the Cold War ending....I don’t think we ever sat down strategically and said what we wanted to make of Russia after the Cold War. Is our goal to democratize them thoroughly? Is our goal to build a cordon sanitaire around them so they can’t break out anymore? So we’ve just done a bit of everything.”

In Scowcroft’s list of priorities for President Obama, Russia now ranks higher. “They have reasserted their voice” and are now “one of the world’s oil giants.” Nevertheless, he dismisses some of the country’s muscle flexing, including its conduct of joint

Naval exercises with Venezuela in the Caribbean. “Neither country really has a navy...and it was a miracle the Russian boats were able to steam that far.”

Hope Amid the Storm. As our time drew to a close, I asked Scowcroft if we should be paying better attention to any global challenge on the horizon. “You know,” he admitted with a slight smile, “I am modestly hopeful about the world, because I think the twentieth century world of power blocs and big power competition is gradually eroding. More and more of the things that matter require cooperation across borders...problems like the future of energy and global warming can only be solved globally.”

Scowcroft agrees that it would be foolish to “predict a benign history.” Yet he is optimistic that “if we really play our cards carefully and thoughtfully, this could be the best century mankind has ever seen.” At the moment, this seems hard to believe as markets crash, fortunes disappear, and the basic principles of freedom are under assault by extremists. Whether Scowcroft’s optimistic outlook becomes reality may depend on how President Obama prioritizes the challenges ahead. One hopes, though, that this eminent senior statesman of U.S. foreign policy is right.

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