

U.S. Needs to Rebalance Its Global Priorities

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The Cold War may be over, but superpower rivalry is back. As a result, the international community's capacity to unite in the face of major global challenges remains as deficient as ever.

Nowhere is this more clearly reflected than in the case of Syria. What was supposed to be a coordinated effort to protect civilians from ruthless repression and advance a peaceful transition — the plan developed by former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan — has now degenerated into a proxy war between the United States and Russia.

Russia's leaders seek to uphold an international system that relies on the unconditional sovereignty of states and rejects the Western-inspired, humanitarian droit d'ingerence. Concerned that the Arab rebellions would radicalize their own repressed minorities, they refuse to allow the UN Security Council to be used to promote revolutionary changes in the Arab world. And Syria, the last Russian outpost of the Cold War, is an asset the Kremlin will do

its utmost to maintain.

But Russia is not the only problem. Major emerging democracies like Brazil, India and South Africa have been especially disappointing in their response to the Arab Spring. All are outspoken paladins of human rights when it comes to condemning any Israeli defensive attack in Gaza as "genocide," but are equally united in opposing UN Security Council action on Syria, even as the repression there grows ever more appalling. The Arab uprisings either clashed with their commitment to the inviolability of national sovereignty, or stoked their fear that "humanitarian intervention" would merely be another tool of regime change and Northern dominance.

The West's response has been far more supportive of Arabs' aspirations, but it has also been contradictory and erratic. For years, both the United States and Europe engaged in a monumental exercise in political hypocrisy, preaching the gospel of democratic change while supporting Arab tyrants. Not surprisingly, they found themselves with no tools to deal with the Arab revolutions.

Indeed, at no time since the Arab Spring began has one been able to discern a coherent Western strategy to address its many challenges and uncertainties. Each case has elicited a different response, owing either to the constraints of international power politics, as is now the case with respect to Syria, or to economic and strategic considerations, as in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

The United States, for its part, did not abandon authoritarian allies such as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali immediately. Had they been swifter and more effective in repressing the mass protests, they might still be in power today — with America's blessing. The United States turned against them not because they were autocrats, but because they were inefficient autocrats.

Meanwhile, Europe finds itself paralyzed by a financial crisis that threatens the European Union's very existence. The EU's traditional foreign policy tools — promoting civil society and encouraging trade — are no substitute for a strategy to confront the new power game in the Mediterranean. And yet Europe has proven utterly incapable of developing an appropriate response to conditions in which Islamist regimes are independently shaping their priorities, while external actors — Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia, China and perhaps even Iran — are vying for influence with an extraordinary combination of financial firepower and political muscle.

Europe cannot afford to remain on the sidelines. NATO's military operation in Libya was a major success for the alliance, but the U.S. decision to let Europe assume the leading role also signaled its intention to "rebalance" its global priorities. With the United States intent on shifting its attention to Asia and the Pacific, it can no longer be expected to take the lead in resolving crises in Europe's backyard.

Indeed, grand designs for the Middle East are no longer on the U.S. agenda. Since its victory in the Cold War, U.S. hegemony in the Middle East has been a story of frustration and unrewarded investment. A shift to foreign policy realism is now expected.

The implications of such a shift are far-reaching. Following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11,

2001, the United States viewed the Islamic world almost exclusively through the prism of the "global war on terror." Now, however, policymakers admit that it was precisely the persistence of secular Arab autocracies that encouraged Islamist terrorism.

As a result, the major premise of current U.S. policy is that a loss of trust by the Islamists in the democratic process would have adverse consequences, and that the restoration of the old regimes could threaten Western interests more than a Muslim Brotherhood government would. The United States is now wisely building working relations with the new Islamist leaders in the hope that they will not endanger the region's U.S.-brokered peace agreements between Israel, Jordan and Egypt, or interfere with the U.S. drive to halt Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Realizing that hope is no easy task. Turmoil in Arab societies is bound to persist for years to come, and emerging regional and world powers can be expected to exploit the international order's fragmentation to advance their interests in the region. With Europe in disarray and Iran's nuclear crisis still resistant to diplomatic resolution, Washington's new foreign policy realism could well imply that the United States, however reluctantly, will ultimately be forced to revisit its "rebalancing strategy."

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