

Worldviews: Walter Mead on foreign policy

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The New York Times has called Walter Russell Mead one of the “country’s liveliest thinkers about America’s role in the world.” A senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, he writes widely on international affairs and is the author of Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World (2001); Power, Terror, Peace and War: America’s Grand Strategy in a World at Risk (2005); and God and Gold: Britain, America, and the Making of the Modern World (2007).

You argue in *God and Gold* that liberal democratic institutions and free trade are keys to a nation’s success in the modern world. What does this perspective tell us about the future of development and about how U.S. foreign policy should be shaped?

Being able to adapt to change and being able to succeed in a capitalist environment—and do so in a way that a country doesn’t feel it’s losing its own identity or betraying its deep values—will be a major key toward predicting how countries fare. In the 19th century, China really wasn’t able to modernize, whereas Japan was quite successful at it. Late in the 20th century, the Chinese seemed to have figured this issue out, and China’s outlook today is much brighter than it was 100 years ago.

So this tells us, first of all, that a nation’s ability to handle change is very important, and second, that one can’t be deterministic about who is and who isn’t able to change. Look at Russia: in some ways it is still struggling with the basic issues about liberal democratic capitalism that it was struggling with 100 years ago, before the Soviet takeover.

How should this insight shape U.S. foreign policy?

One of the best things the U.S. has been doing since about the 1850s is offer educational opportunities to people from other countries. This is actually something

that missionaries and missionary colleges started, and it has had a profound impact on the development of a lot of countries. It's the least coercive and possibly most effective form of foreign aid.

It's interesting that some of the countries where we are having some of the most serious foreign-policy problems are places where we seem to be doing a bit better job of promoting exchange programs. Pakistan is one of the countries now sending a large number of Fulbright scholars to America. People who come here don't always love us. But over time this kind of exposure is very important. And obviously it also helps educate Americans about other societies.

You mentioned China. What do you see as the likely opportunities and challenges arising as this major country integrates itself into the world system?

The rise of China is one of the most dramatic events in all of human history—maybe even bigger than the rise of Europe. It's certainly a bigger event than the Industrial Revolution in Europe, judging by the number of Chinese lives being changed.

The fact that scores of millions of people in China are going to have greater access to education and more control over what they do, the kind of work they do and where they live is a good thing. And so is their having much more freedom than the previous generation of Chinese did—religious freedom, political freedom and lifestyle freedom.

On the other hand, as with the Industrial Revolution, the rapid transformation of Chinese society is testing and in some cases overstressing what that society is capable of dealing with. Industrialization in the U.S. meant that whereas in 1800 upward of 80 percent of Americans lived on farms, today only about 6 percent do. China is moving through that kind of social transformation much more quickly than the U.S. did.

In China the corruption of local governments and the nation's failure to deliver services is causing all kinds of new injustices and strains. These and other stresses could culminate in political disorder or in a radical Chinese nationalism. Those possibilities are grim. We don't know, and the Chinese don't know, how it's going to work out.

Do you see religion as a factor in China's modernization?

There is tremendous religious dynamism in China. The country has various traditional religions, including Buddhism and Taoism. A quasi-state-sponsored revival of Confucianism is having limited success. The country's traditional Muslim communities are growing. And then there's really an explosion of Christianity. Much of it is a kind of Pentecostal-like house-church Christianity, but mainline Protestant and Catholic groups are also growing rapidly, some times in the face of persecution, harassment or discrimination.

Some observers of China wonder whether these religious movements might in some way help the country with modernization.

I'm not sure anything can guide the modernization of China—the process is so big and multifaceted, and it's happening so quickly. But an increasing number of the country's intellectuals and government officials are seeing that maybe religion can play a positive role in giving people a code of ethics and be a way of stabilizing society. After the earthquake in Sichuan, religious groups showed the state, which has wanted to monopolize things, that they were able to help in the relief effort. That may be a sign that the Chinese understand that a complex, modernizing nation really needs to have a rich, diverse religious community, as well as other elements of civil society, simply to be able to function.

Switching to the Middle East, let's talk about the future of Iraq. What is the long-term outlook for Iraq and its place in U.S. foreign policy?

I've just been reading a book by French analyst Olivier Roy, which was written in 2006 when the situation in Iraq looked much grimmer than it does now. He is extremely critical of U.S. foreign policy, particularly in regard to the war in Iraq, but he argues that American power in the Middle East seems to be greater than ever. That claim is a little startling, but I think it is a solid one.

Al-Qaeda types wanted to replace ordinary politics with a politics of the imagination and fantasy; they believed in a sudden transformation of Middle East society. There's been a tremendous turn away from that vision (even though there's not a lot of love for the U.S. in the region). The great visionary alternative has failed. The Arab countries increasingly need to turn to the question of how to function in this world order while remaining true to their core values. In some of the Gulf states, Arab institutions are competing at the top level of international politics and business. A synthesis of Arab culture and the liberal capitalist system is emerging—one that

could be the basis for a new era. How this might or might not play out in Iraq is hard to say.

The future of Iraq is in some ways tied up with the question of whether the U.S. and Iran are going to avoid war. If war can be avoided, then the chances for stability in Iraq are better. But it would be a big mistake to think that Iraq is about to become the Switzerland of the Middle East. It has a dark past—one which can't be overcome quickly. But the Iraqis have made extraordinary progress.

Don't the national security experts tell us that al-Qaeda has grown in the past eight years and is still capable of wreaking havoc?

Al-Qaeda has hardened into a kind of permanent minority status. But what Osama bin Laden wanted was a clash of civilizations—between the Muslim world and the West—and the bulk of Middle East countries were never very attracted to that kind of vision. For most people in the Middle East, the allure and glamour of that vision are gone.

If you look at where al-Qaeda is having success, a lot of it is with second-generation Muslims born in Europe and also among converts to Islam, primarily in Europe. The particular circumstances of the Pakistani community in Britain have something to do with it.

During the U.S. presidential campaign, Barack Obama said that the war in Iraq distracted us from the real front in the war on terrorism—Afghanistan. But what are the chances of success there? The history of Afghanistan hardly supports the idea that Western powers can bring stability to that country. Moreover, the crisis in Afghanistan spills over into Pakistan—and the Afghan-Pakistani border seems to have always been virtually uncontrollable.

There is a much better chance of Iraq emerging as a reasonably modern, progressive state than there is of Afghanistan doing so. The task in Afghanistan is much harder than that in Iraq. And so far we have not articulated goals for Afghanistan or the policy instruments that would get us there. Among some Democrats, the emphasis on the Afghanistan conflict as the “good war” came partly as a way of saying, “Well, I’m against the war in Iraq, but I’m not soft on terrorism.” It was a way to attack the Bush administration from the right. I am not sure that that is the road to good policy.

I agree that Pakistan presents a very serious problem. A lot of people forget that the U.S. ratified a nuclear deal with India in October, which to Pakistan was a slap in the face. This is not a time when it's easy for Pakistani officials to be seen agreeing to "American demands."

How would you rate the past eight years of U.S. foreign policy on Israel/Palestine? Has the U.S. failed to move the peace process forward, or was there never much chance to do that?

Both viewpoints are partly true. The collapse of the negotiations between Ehud Barak and Yasir Arafat in the waning days of the Clinton administration was a catastrophe for the peace process. The Clinton administration made the mistake of trying to solve too many issues at once. The result of that collapse was an intifada on the part of the Palestinians, Ariel Sharon's rise to power in Israel and the end of the Oslo process of negotiations, which the U.S. had been trying to build for decades.

Any new American administration would have had to pause to reflect before becoming engaged again in the Middle East, in view of the breakdown of trust between Israelis and Palestinians, the failure of the negotiations and the political collapse of Israel's peace wing. There wasn't much the U.S. could do right away. September 11 came during this pause. So that terrible event occurred during the first period in 20 years in which there wasn't some kind of Middle East peace process on the ground.

The Bush administration went on to make its own mistakes. For far too long it clung to the idea that the U.S. didn't need to be engaged—something the new administration is going to be.

Right now, the situation is dire. Israel has had an extremely weak government, and the elections there may make the political picture even more complicated. On the Palestinian side, the Fatah wing doesn't have the authority to negotiate, and the Hamas wing doesn't have the will to negotiate.

Part of the problem is that in a sense Americans don't really care what agreement the two sides reach—we just want them to agree. If the two sides are happy, we're happy. But both care passionately about the terms and the details of any agreement. The Israelis think: "If we're going to give up land, close down the settlements and probably pay some kind of compensation to refugees, what

guarantees do we have that the morning after the agreement is signed we won't wake up to more rockets coming over from Gaza? And then if we tell the Palestinian government to end the bombing, will it say: 'Well, we don't control those people?'"

The Israelis need to feel that the Palestinians really want peace. But the kind of peace that's available is not that popular with a lot of Palestinians. Americans keep trying to sell peace to the two parties, but it's hard to do that when you want the deal more than do the people you're trying to bring to the table.

Could the U.S. be not only a broker but an enforcer of a peace?

The British tried that in the 1940s and it did not work out well.

Christian debate over foreign policy often takes the form of the question: What would Reinhold Niebuhr do? That is, how can the U.S. balance its commitment to moral ideals with a realism about limits and about human evil? In that light, how would you characterize U.S. foreign policy of the past eight years? Has it been Niebuhrian in its realism or anti-Niebuhrian in pursuing utopian hopes as to what the U.S. by itself can accomplish?

The policy has mainly been incoherent. It had aspirations to be realistic and hard-nosed, but it didn't always succeed in being so. And it had aspirations to be very idealistic and transformative and wasn't successful with those aims.

There was a sense in Washington in the run-up to the Iraq war that if the U.S. led, the Europeans and the UN Security Council would fall into line. They didn't. So the administration was in the awkward position of having asked the Security Council to authorize a war and then going ahead with it even though it wasn't authorized. Then failure to find weapons of mass destruction, which in the argument before the UN had been central to the case for war, was certainly not a success for the U.S. Moreover, the aspiration for social transformation of the Middle East—a kind of Wilsonian utopian aspiration—was a conspicuous failure. The policies were incoherent from the start. After September 11 the Bush administration was often able to articulate the right goals, but it was not very successful at coming up with policy measures.

In some areas of foreign policy, however, the administration was quite successful—and especially in regard to Asia. In the long run of history, people may look back on this aspect of the Bush years and be kinder to his administration than

many of us feel like being right now. U.S. relations with China, India, Japan and most of the other major countries in Asia are far stronger than they were eight years ago. The levels of U.S. cooperation with China are extraordinary compared to what they used to be—in managing the Taiwan issue, for example, and bringing the Chinese into the six-power talks on North Korea. On the whole, we've been able to deepen links with Japan even as we've deepened them with China, which is a very important part of trying to build a structure of lasting peace in Asia.

The new, emerging strategic partnership between the U.S. and India is a way of helping to make sure that the balance of power in a rising Asia remains stable. India and Japan can serve as a balance to China. The political geography of Asia is taking shape in a way that makes it difficult for China to pursue some kind of Asian hegemony the way Germany tried to do in Europe. That is a major contribution to the future peace of the world.

Asia, it can be argued, is the most important region when it comes to securing prosperity and stability in the 21st century. It has half of the world's people, and it includes the world's two largest countries, both of which are armed with nuclear weapons and are rapidly growing economically and developing technologically. Figuring out how the rising powers of Asia can coexist within a stable and peaceful international system is one of the biggest tasks of this era—and we're not doing badly there.