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## RESTORING A SENSE OF PURPOSE TO US FOREIGN POLICY

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**E**ver since 1980, the world has grown accustomed to a pattern of random American military interventionism which has been justified by any number of reasons, few of which have produced anything one could remotely describe as a positive outcome. All have contributed to the destabilisation of the Greater Middle East and many have been supported by Britain, some by France. Today, many observers rue the reality that American power is fraying as some unimpeachable linchpin of international order. President Barack Obama is berated for doing nothing in Syria, for being weak on Ukraine, for trying to withdraw troops from Afghanistan too early. The US administration is under pressure, at home and abroad, to restore the image of American strength by responding more forcefully to the challenge of Chinese claims in the South China Sea, of Russia's intervention in Syria or the reinvigorated Taliban in Afghanistan.

Such critics should ask themselves what led the US president to proclaim the Carter Doctrine 25 years ago and how it has fared since. Historical perspective, what the French historian Fernand Braudel called "le temps long", might bring a sense of perspective to the argument and temper the enthusiasm of those profess to believe in the virtue of the overwhelming power of the US military which has been the central fact of global politics since 1980.

Until 1980, the hierarchy of interests that shaped US foreign policy privileged Europe and East Asia. Those were the two most important theatres in US foreign policy. As that singular critic of US foreign policy since he began publishing on the issue 13 years ago, Professor Andrew Bacevich points out, from the 1940 to the 1990s "there was a certain cohesion...you could say there was a strategy. If you wanted to reduce that strategy to a single word, the word would be 'containment'. At least until 1980, the Greater Middle East tended to be viewed as peripheral in the hierarchy." Jimmy Carter's response to the hostage crisis in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan changed all that and began the process which, by the early 1990s had vaulted the Greater Middle East to the top rank of US foreign policy interests. By the time you get to 9/11 "the change gets expressed above all and most regrettably in the reorientation of the US military".

US interest shifts from Europe and East Asia to the Greater Middle East which is where US forces are sent to fight and occupy. Two strands of thinking combine into a new doctrine of global hegemony. As the last standing ideological opponent, the Soviet Union, is slain, the end of history is set. Liberal democratic capitalism is destined to triumph everywhere (the financial crisis of 2008 is airbrushed out of the picture). When such convictions are welded into the long held belief of American exceptionalism – the City upon a Hill image, that can be dated back to the Founding Fathers of modern America four centuries ago, the result is an ever greater willingness to intervene with the conviction that such forays from Somalia to Haiti, Kosovo to Afghanistan are going to spread western democratic values and help to bring into existence this new America-dominated order.

“Purpose gives you practical, earthy things to do. Destiny gives you ill-defined missions” argues Bacevich who, as a former Westpoint Military Academy graduate has a better understanding of things military than many politicians and members of think tanks which earn their living from discussing how best America can deploy its might across the world. From the 1940s to the 1980s, US foreign policy was practical, thereafter it morphed into mission creep with the disastrous consequences which have resulted in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. The cost in lives and money are unfathomable. “How the West lost the Middle East”, a lecture given at Georgetown University in 2013 by the foreign chairman and shadow spokesman on foreign affairs of the UK Conservative Party, Michael Ancram, sums up the result in a nutshell.

For all our asserted interest in Arab identity and rights, he argues “our constant Israel-centric foreign policy on both sides of the Atlantic has undermined (the Arabs) faith in the integrity of our assertions. Where we might on occasion have reined in Israel in we have by and large not only turned a blind eye but given a nod and a wink towards what they were about.” Where a light touch would have helped, we have “too often responded with ‘Shock and Awe’...’degrading’ insurgent capability has become an euphemism for slaughtering enemy forces, often without too much regard for collateral damage to innocent civilians on the way. We often treated the Arab in the street with undisguised contempt while paying court to their leaders as royalty. Yet even as we backed strongman leaders who could keep the lid on unhelpful dissent at the next moment we would casually aid and abet their downfall without any real appreciation of what was likely to replace them.” George W. Bush, Tony Blair and Nicolas Sarkozy were apprentice sorcieris who look pitiful when compared with their post 1945 predecessors.

Great Britain and France began this trail of errors by “a mixture of post-imperial arrogance and extremism and quite straightforward betrayal” after 1918. America followed as, together with Britain it engineered if it did not carry out the overthrow of the democratically elected Mossadeq in Iran in 1952, as it turned its back on the results of the democratic elections it had insisted upon to the Legislative Council in the Palestinian Authority in 2005 and as it decided that votes cast are not the be all and end all of democracy in Egypt two years ago.

No only do we trample our own oft proclaimed principles but we are, in Michael Ancram’s words “innately suspicious of Islam (shades of past centuries) and never seem to understand the distinction between Islamism and national Islamism and universal Islamism or Ummah; and in dealing with Arab and wider Islamic communities these distinctions matter.”

In such a context, is it sacrilege to suggest that calibrated strategic retrenchment that invites other parties in the Greater Middle East, East Asia and Eastern Europe to construct regional economic and security architecture which acknowledges neighbouring power’s core interest might be worth pursuing? Ukraine’s national identity and the antecedents of Kievan Rus will have to find a way of living and working together. Saudi Arabia will have to accept that Iran belongs to the concert of the Greater

Middle East. Israel will be less inclined to dictate policy in Washington where its interests and those of America do not always coincide. Algeria and Morocco might even realise they have interests in common. Dictats from far away Washington will not be automatically kowtowed to. Critics berate, as they see it, President Barack Obama's weakness and pusillanimity. He may, in a few years time, turn out to have restored to American, and Western foreign policy a sense of purpose and buried the ill defined sense of manifest destiny which has cost many lives, untold destruction and the contempt of the Arab world.