

SPEECH: HOUSE U.S. LEADERSHIP IN SEOUL, ASAN APRIL 28, 2015

Dr. Chung, Dr. Hahm and Distinguished Guests

Dr. Henry Kissinger whom we all wish were here today and for whom I am a frail substitute recently wrote another of his remarkable books called “World Order”. If you haven’t read it, you surely should. Unfortunately, as Dr. Kissinger would agree, what we are facing today as we look across the globe is an almost unprecedented degree of world disorder.

The Middle East, of course, is in near total chaos as proxy wars between a hegemonic Iranian regime and a fearful Saudi Arabia spill from country to country engulfing Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, and most recently Yemen with surely more to come.

An expansionist Russia, having feasted on Crimea, clearly is looking to expand further into Ukraine, and even more alarming, potentially into the Baltics. This latter step would pose a direct Russia-NATO confrontation. A military engagement could be costly, but a failure to defend the Baltics would spell the end of NATO with the attendant costs in credibility worldwide for the United States, NATO’s leader.

Closer to Seoul, we see an increasingly assertive China bullying smaller Southeast Asian neighbors, claiming effective ownership of the South China Sea, expanding its military capability to levels far in excess of any defensive needs and labeling the US presence in Asia a “Cold War relic” which must end. In short, China is seeking to remove the US from Asia and also challenging U.S. interests and influence beyond Asia.

If all that isn’t enough, non-state actors like ISIS and Boko Haram are creating mayhem in multiple parts of the world. Whatever degree of global order has existed from time to time since the treaty of Westphalia in 1648—and there were other periods when it didn’t—clearly global order is nowhere evident today.

You might challenge me by arguing there is reasonable regional order in Europe and here in Asia. And while that may be relatively true, compared to the Middle East, I would suggest both Europeans and Asians are whistling past the graveyard. Europe indulges in a form of escapism, expanding its welfare states, dismantling its militaries, and largely ignoring problems around it even as Mr. Putin encroaches. Here in Asia, the tendency is to focus on the growing trade with China not on mounting intimidation by China.

II. AMERICA, A BYSTANDER NOT A LEADER

So what about the United States, which ever since World War II—through both democrat and Republican administrations—and often though not always with a fair

degree of bipartisanship in foreign policy, has been the primary upholder of at least some degree of world order?

That has not been American altruism, but rather has reflected a deeper understanding that the United States is not an island and that its own national security and prosperity require a continuing commitment to maintaining order abroad.

Like me, most of you are old enough to remember that there have been periods when the United States shrunk from this responsibility, most notably in the years immediately following America's painful experience in Vietnam. At that time the country turned inward and congress cut military spending, hobbled intelligence gathering and more broadly sought to constrain the president's ability to conduct foreign policy.

Yet, it was only a half dozen years later with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 that national confidence was restored, military spending soared and America faced up to a blustry but brittle Soviet Union and won the Cold War.

The problem with America today, however, is rather different than in the late 70's. For the first time, even including Jimmy Carter, a reluctant global leader, we have a president who believes that American power is the cause of most of the world's problems rather than a potential solution to them.

Rather than being steadfast in supporting traditional allies, Barack Obama is a supplicant on the doorsteps of adversaries. His Mideast policy increasingly is the avid pursuit of Iran in the mistaken impression that history will see his Iran diplomacy as comparable to Nixon's historic opening to China. His determination to diminish America's role in the Middle East is frightening and is uniting allies as dissimilar as Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Similarly, President Obama watches Putin's invasion of the Ukraine and declines to provide Ukraine *even* with basic defensive weapons or worse yet, to take steps to deter Putin's clear lust for further expansion into the Baltics.

The aim, of course, is not to seek military confrontation with Russia, but precisely the opposite. As my former colleague Bret Stephens argues in his new book, *America in Retreat*, America's role should be akin to that of a policeman on the beat—walking the beat to “reassure the good, deter the tempted and punish the wicked.” That, of course, is the concept of troops as a trip wire that has helped to protect South Korea for the past six decades.

President Obama continues to place great faith in dialogue, though so far nothing has come of it. Chatting with Raul Castro is not a foreign policy. If Teddy Roosevelt famously said America should speak softly but carry a big stick, the United States these days prefers to employ a big microphone while carrying a twig.

And having drawn a redline in Syria and abandoned it unilaterally, drawing a new “redline” against Putin in the Baltics would be credible with no one unless backed by U.S. troops, which the president clearly seems determined to avoid.

Indeed, the refusal to protect the Baltics actually invites Russian aggression which, as I noted earlier, will be costly to confront or, even more costly in terms of U.S. credibility in the world if unchallenged.

If Saudis and Israelis, Taiwanese and South Koreans, Poles and other U.S. allies already worry about the constancy of U.S. commitments, what then?

III. AND CLOSER TO US HERE?

President Obama’s “pivot to Asia” has turned out to be a pirouette. Rather than facing up to the regional and increasingly global challenge from China, the Obama Administration is largely ignoring it. Or much rather, it is encouraging Japan to play a larger role in East Asian security, which is clearly unsettling our South Korean allies.

Rather than seeking to balance China’s growing assertiveness with a strong foreign policy and an increased military capability to back it up, the United States is allowing the balance of military power to shift in China’s favor and is pretending that a policy of seeking to integrate an authoritarian and assertive China into a liberal world order is a goal China shares—despite strong evidence to the contrary.

China’s goal is not to be the junior member in a G2 marriage, but rather to displace U.S. power and influence in Asia and ultimately around the globe.

As Henry Kissinger noted in describing the traditional sino-centric system, China, he wrote, “considered itself, in a sense, the sole sovereign government of the world,” wherein the emperor’s purview was not a “sovereign state of China...but ‘All Under Heaven,’ of which China formed the central and civilized part.”

A new study from the Council on Foreign Relations starkly warns that the United States must craft a more coherent U.S. response to China’s growing influence/intimidation in Asia:

“Washington’s current approach towards Beijing, one that values China’s economic and political integration in the liberal international order at the expense of the United States’ global preeminence and long-term strategic interests, hardly amounts to a ‘grand strategy, much less an effective one, the authors write. The need for a more coherent U.S. response to increasing Chinese power is long overdue,’ they conclude.”

Yet, such a response seems remote for now.

So why is this administration largely a bystander in world affairs?

The Obama Administration genuinely believes that foreign affairs are a distraction from more important domestic priorities. The president's goal is to remove the United States from the world, not lead the world. Displaying U.S. power and influence abroad, in the president's mind, is a distraction from income redistribution at home.

In short, the White House sees all of this as a zero sum game—which it isn't.

The truth is, as much as idealists might wish it otherwise, there is no substitute for American leadership if the goal is to preserve a liberal world order.

The idea being peddled in the United States that America must choose between fixing problems at home and having influence abroad is a false and truly dangerous dichotomy. Repainting and refurbishing your own home won't prevent its being vandalized or burned down in a deteriorating and dangerous neighborhood.

For proof of this proposition, look at Europe. The more that European nations focus on expanding their welfare states and coddling their citizens, the less inclined or capable any of them (with the modest exception of France in its former colonial territories) are to resist external threats. Indeed, even as Mr. Putin threatens neighbors to the East, they convince themselves as Europeans did pre-World War II that it won't happen here.

IV. IS THE UNITED STATES INEVITABLY HEADED THE SAME WAY? NO

Recall it is not the first time the United States has been weak and vacillating. In the years leading up to both World Wars, America sought to hide behind its oceans and declined to engage. Much more recently, Jimmy Carter early on pursued an Obama foreign policy—avoiding use of U.S. power and simply preaching peaceful virtues and values. Even Carter reversed course after being shocked by the Iran hostage crisis and a Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The reversal was accelerated by Ronald Reagan. So in less than four years, America moved from Carter's malaise to Reagan's "shining city on a hill;" from paralysis over hostage taking to "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down that wall"; from American retreat to winning the Cold War. .

An optimist would argue that the United States, given all its underlying strengths can return to a role of world leadership quickly if it makes up its mind to do so.

The underlying American economy remains far and away the world's strongest even if hampered by budget deficits and debt. U.S. GDP has grown at 2.4 percent over the

past two years, behind the 3 percent average from 1980 to 2007. But if we just begin, as some believe we will, to approach the average growth rate of 3 percent, the United States will remain far into the future the world's largest economy.

American innovation is alive and well, even if frustrated by overregulation. American higher education remains the best in the world, even if secondary education seems resistant to improvement. America's ability to attract and assimilate waves of immigrants remains a strength that constantly injects new enterprise and energy into the society, and this is true notwithstanding the controversy over America's porous Southern border.

American military strength, albeit, diminishing under the weight of sequestration, and a president who prefers domestic spending, remains the most effective in the world.

I wrote a controversial series for the *Wall Street Journal* in 1989, when much of conventional wisdom saw the United States slipping behind Japan as much as it sees the United States slipping behind China these days. I argued this was nonsense for many of the reasons just enunciated, and that proved true. I was an optimist.

A pessimist these days would argue that U.S. problems run much deeper than those of 25 years ago.

They would point out that the United States today lacks a cohesive set of values from which it can draw strength and when needed rally Americans to make sacrifices.

They would argue that the national demographics are rapidly shifting with less and less social cohesion. And that a steadily growing number of people are dependent on government largess and thus ask "what can the country do for me rather than what can I do for my country" (The number of Americans on food stamps rose 50 percent to 47 million between 2009 and 2013!)

A pessimist would further point out that the American political system is badly broken; that all too many politicians see public service as self-service, and that the partisanship that pervades domestic politics has now extended to foreign policy, rendering a bipartisan foreign policy a relic of the past.

Still, I remain more optimist than pessimist. I truly believe there is nothing wrong with America that inspired leadership cannot fix.

A leader who genuinely put America's future first could, I believe, begin to reverse the negative trends, restore bipartisanship in foreign policy, and reassert and explain the need for America's global leadership.

Such leadership emerging from either political party would summon what is best in Americans. Rather than indulging Americans in the false belief that government can provide a risk free life in a risk free world, such leadership would summon them back to individual responsibility and global responsibility. Such leadership would teach Americans as previous generations had learned that we cannot enjoy comfortable and prosperous lives in a world dominated by powers antithetical to our liberal values.

That is not simply idealism. That is realism.