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Opening Remarks
James A. Baker, III
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Thursday, May 12, 2016

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, distinguished members of the Committee on Foreign Relations . . . it is a distinct honor to once again be back before this committee.

I have been asked to keep these remarks brief so we can spend more time discussing global affairs. So let me say just a few words about America's current role on the world stage and then suggest an approach to US foreign policy that I believe is best suited for our nation.

Let me start by putting America's place in the world today into perspective.

More than 70 years after the conclusion of World War II, the United States remains the strongest nation in the world. We have a dynamic and resilient economy, the most powerful military and the widest array of strategic alliances, ranging from NATO to ASEAN. Do we have problems? Indeed, we do. Domestically, our economy continues to sag. Internationally, we are losing some of the respect as a global leader that we earned over the course of decades. And as the current presidential election is demonstrating, Americans are losing faith in institutions--from Washington to Wall Street--that have aided our advancement over the years.

At the same time, much of the rest of the world--countries like China, Brazil and India --are catching up with us, largely because they are adopting our paradigm of free markets. And that should be viewed as a positive trend because it is helping hundreds of millions of people rise from poverty.

Still, we should remain the world's preeminent leader for the foreseeable future. We should accept that responsibility, not shrink from it. If the United States does not exercise power, others will. We simply have too much at stake in the world to walk away from it, even if we could.

Other countries depend on our leadership. This is most obviously true of our allies in Western Europe, East Asia, and elsewhere. But even countries that are sometimes anything but friendly often seek our engagement.

Does this mean that we are perfect? Of course not.

But in the major global conflicts of the last century--(World War I, World War II, and the Cold War)--the United States played a historic role in defeating imperialism and totalitarianism.

So the question is: How should the United States engage in foreign policy? How do we formulate policies that best serve the United States as we begin to approach what many consider to be the end of the unipolar era?

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First of all, international leadership doesn't involve a choice between sending in the 101st Airborne or doing nothing. We can lead politically, diplomatically and economically without putting American boots on the ground.

I believe that the United States should continue to chart its course based on the paradigm I would call "selective engagement." This approach, which would continue the internationalism that our nation has embraced since 1945, would recognize that the United States has core interests in the world and must protect them. At the same time, it would also acknowledge the reality that our power is limited.

Using "selective engagement" as a blueprint, we can identify America's vital interests in the world and then advance them using all of the tools available to our foreign policy--including our many strategic alliances, our economic clout, our diplomatic assets and, as our last resort, our military.

So what are those vital interests? They range from combatting international terrorism to managing the emergence of China as a global power and from stemming the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction to expanding free trade.

The approach I suggest does not fall easily into traditional categories of foreign policy--that is: "realism" or "idealism." It contains the "best elements of both." And it represents one of our most distinctive national characteristics: We are a practical people less interested in ideological purity than in solving problems.

The practice of "selective engagement" should be informed by "pragmatic idealism." While firmly grounded in values, "selective engagement" would understand and appreciate the complexity of the real world--a world of hard choices and painful trade-offs. This is the real world in which we must live, decide, and act, with due regard, of course, for our principles and values.

It would require that there be an overriding national interest at stake, particularly if military action is contemplated.

Such a balanced approach, I believe, can help us avoid both the cynicism of "realism" and the impracticality of "idealism." And it promises no easy answers or quick fixes.

But such an approach does, I am convinced, offer our surest guide and best hope for navigating our great country safely through this precarious period of unparalleled opportunity in world affairs.

Thank you.

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