

A Sit-Down with Brent Scowcroft

by Justine A. Rosenthal

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TNI's editor Justine A. Rosenthal talks with the General about the tasks ahead and advice to be heeded by the incoming Obama administration.

What are the acute foreign-policy problems Barack Obama will face as he takes office?

The tasks ahead are enormous. The situations we face in the Middle East, Central and South Asia are at the heart of our most acute problems. By going into Iraq and Afghanistan with a transformationalist agenda, we have brought long-standing problems of the region to a boiling point. Whether it is a Shia, Sunni, Palestinian, Israeli, Persian or Arab issue, they all form one big mare's nest, and they all feed off one another. The question is how the new administration will deal with these diverse issues. We can only hope that, at least for a time, America has had enough of transforming the world.

What would a more realist-driven approach look like?

We tend to throw terms around loosely these days—realism, idealism, isolationism, interventionism. Perhaps this is because U.S. foreign policy has followed a compound track with three distinct stages, and we have struggled between the ideals of a city on the hill and a city on the march. During the first one hundred years of our foreign policy, we adhered to a formulation of our goals conceived by George Washington: realism in the most traditional sense. The notion was best phrased by John Quincy Adams who said we welcome all those who are searching for freedom and democracy, but we go “not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” We are the well-wishers of all who seek freedom. We are the guarantors only of our own.

But with the advent of Wilsonianism, the Washington/Adams dictum was deemed insufficient. Instead, we aspired to be evangelizers of democracy. From that time until very recently, we have debated how important democracy promotion is to American foreign policy. During the cold war, it was acceptable to support dictatorships in the larger struggle against the Soviet Union. But with 9/11 came a new manifestation of foreign policy, perhaps best thought of as a battle between the realists and the transformationalists. Realists argued we needed to gather our friends, our allies, and join together in combating terrorism. The transformationalists—some people call them the neocons—disagreed. They contended we did not have time to reach out to our friends and our allies—such an approach would only slow us down. America knew what had to be done, we had unmatched resources and thus we should do what was needed—transform the world. We should do so starting with the Middle East; it needed to be turned into a bastion of democracy. This was transformationalism: idealism with a sword. Especially in light of the current crises we face, a return to a more realist approach would be an appropriate move.

How should we prioritize with this different modus operandi?

The enlightened realist would say we always ought to hope to do somewhat more than we think we are able to, but never try to do more than we clearly know we can. The most idealistic dreams sometimes lead to the worst disasters because they cannot be implemented. When it comes to making foreign policy, there is frequently a competition between the immediate and the important. When they coincide, action is clearly indicated. However, we need realistic assessments of how ready the world is to accept our policies before we offer our help.

The Palestinian peace process is such a case. Though the Bush administration tried to reach a resolution, our approach has been to ask the Israelis and Palestinians to sit down together, hoping they would then come to an agreement. But both sides are too weak for such a U.S. approach. Resolution requires the personal attention of the president. Washington will need to lead the way with a U.S. plan, based on the results of the Taba accords. They are considered by thoughtful people on both sides to be basically just. Implementation is now key.

If the peace process is abandoned at this point, it will be seen by the Muslim world as another indication that the United States does not care much about their interests. And while the Palestinian issue may not be on every Muslim's mind, it stands as a symbol of injustice. That symbol of injustice, and our unwillingness or inability to do anything about it, weighs down everything America tries to do in the region. In the first Gulf War, for example, the United States had major military help from Arab countries. Now they are little to be seen, partly because they did not want us to go in, but also because it is politically dangerous domestically for an Arab regime to be seen as an ally of the United States.

A dynamic Palestinian peace process can help change the psychological climate. It would take some of the wind out of Hezbollah's and Hamas's sails. And Middle Eastern states might then be willing to use their influence to offset the power of Iran. It would as well tend to put Iran back on the defensive. After all, U.S. actions in both Iraq and Afghanistan destroyed Iran's main adversaries and, in a way, empowered the leadership in Tehran. An on-track peace process would help liberate Arab states so they could potentially assist in the rehabilitation of Iraq. In almost every sense, American goals are facilitated by solving the Israeli-Palestinian struggle. And these are the tests we face: stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan, containing the terrorist threat, preventing a nuclear-armed Iran, and creating better relationships with rising powers to do so.

Are there some specific actions you would take on our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?

We must not abandon Iraq. On its own merits, the Middle East is important, but Iraq and the surrounding countries also contain two-thirds of the world's petroleum reserves. A dangerously unstable Iraq could have hugely negative economic consequences for the world, and therefore also for us. The way to start reversing our fortunes in the region is to take a more realistic tack. Our objective in Iraq ought to be facilitating a country that is an influence for stability in the region, not a source of chaos and conflict. Democracy is not a precondition for stability. Should it happen, all the better. But we must accept that such a change would now take more than is realistic for us to provide.

In Afghanistan, we must also redefine "victory." We have tended to distort our original mission to destroy the Taliban (because of its refusal to deny sanctuary to al-Qaeda) into a mission to transform Afghanistan. Traditionally, Afghanistan has been a loose coalition of ethnic-religious groups, tribal leaders and warlords presided over by at times an almost-ephemeral central government. If America can restore that kind of Afghanistan, we can call it a success. To do so we will need to reach out to any groups and people

that might be able to be useful in restoring such a system. Kabul should be helped to the extent it seeks our involvement—and as long as we can be useful. Again, the goal should be stability.

How does all of this affect our Iran policy? Will we be able to prevent them from realizing a full-blown nuclear capability?

When looking at Iran, we can see the spillover effects of our actions elsewhere. I do not believe the situation is hopeless at this point. We have not exhausted all of the possibilities for discussions with Iran that could yield positive results. There are two issues to keep in mind. First there is Iran in the region—we must consider what Iran's goals are, as well as our own (what kind of Iraq might satisfy both of us), and the broader desiderata of the region. Iran is an outlier of sorts in the region. It is an ancient, historic culture, but it is a Shia culture in a Sunni region, a Persian culture in an Arab region. We should work to construct an Iraq of such a character that it will not cause Iran to fear another attack of the type perpetuated by Saddam Hussein. We should consider what kind of regional framework could be developed to deal with these concerns, and to give everyone in the region a greater sense of security.

The second issue is Iran's nuclear program. Negotiating that issue are Iran on the one side and the five permanent members (P-5) of the Security Council, plus Germany, on the other. Neither the United States nor its negotiating partners wants Iran to have nuclear weapons. But, so far, Iran has been able to play one party against another, and to proceed without significant hindrance.

We need to approach Iran with a united front and demonstrate why it is not in Tehran's security interests to develop the capability for uranium enrichment. Whether a country seeks nuclear weapons or not, such a capability is a relatively simple matter once a supply of enriched uranium is assured. And if Tehran produces enriched uranium, then countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey will be encouraged to follow suit to protect themselves. None of that improves Tehran's security. The P-5 plus Germany can offer to supply Tehran with enriched-uranium fuel, guarantee that supply and remove spent fuel as long as Iran adheres to IAEA safeguards. That is, after all, far more economical than Iran building an enrichment facility, and it is also better for Tehran's own security.

Why hasn't the approach you suggest been taken so far?

One of the reasons is the interests of other powers. China, for instance, does not want Iran to have nuclear weapons, but it imports a great deal of oil from Iran and considers Tehran an important commercial partner. Washington should explain to Beijing that it is much better to take tough multilateral economic measures to convince Iran to refocus its nuclear program, as any military action in the Middle East would disrupt or destroy the oil supplies so vital to the Chinese economy. It is better, then, to make a concerted, sincere, joint effort now.

Russia has an even greater stake in all of this. And on the Iranian nuclear issue, Moscow has been largely helpful. The Russians do not want Iran to have nuclear weapons. But in pique at the United States, they may be prepared to do things in their short-term interests that are against their long-term objectives. The United States' problem right now, in addition to our somewhat-bristling relationship, is the very specific issue of Georgia.

The realist way to deal with that is, first of all, to sit down with the Russians. But before we do that, we must develop in our own minds a strategy for Russia, something we have not fundamentally rethought since the end of the cold war. Is our overall goal in Russia democratization? Is it to build a "cordon sanitaire" around Russia so it cannot spread its influence? Is it to try to get Moscow to help with the

world's energy problems? Is it something else? Washington has thus far done a little of everything, but in the process we have treated Russia as an afterthought, deepening the sense of humiliation held over from the end of the cold war and Russia's subsequent economic crisis.

We need to convince the Russians that we take them seriously and their views do matter. One of the areas in which we can tangibly demonstrate that is on the nuclear front. Telling Moscow, as we have done, that we do not need to renegotiate lapsing arms-control treaties because Russia is no longer an enemy has produced an unintended effect. Such a proposition in essence translates as "You no longer matter." Instead, we should approach Moscow by saying that we—America and Russia—the custodians of the nuclear age, need to start down a path with a goal of ensuring that nuclear weapons are never used. We should work together on issues of proliferation and devise a program to make nuclear power available to all nations without the threat of creating a nuclear-weapons capability.

How does the policy of NATO enlargement help or hinder bringing Russia into a more cooperative relationship?

Dealing with Russia on these priorities means not pressing NATO enlargement. Realism again calls for analyzing our goals. America became mesmerized by the "color" revolutions, seeing them as democracy on the march. And, in a sense, they were. But those movements were also the aftereffects of countries emerging from the Soviet Union; states that are still trying to figure out who they are and where they belong. Of course America should help with that process. But the best way to do so is to use the European Union as a vehicle for change. One of the EU's missions is to prepare countries like Georgia and Ukraine by modernizing their political and economic structures so they can become members of the democratic-capitalist system. That is not the job of NATO; NATO is a military alliance.

We must remember the Russians, too, are searching. They have been liberated from the shackles of their history and are redefining who they are and where they belong. America needs to be patient. America needs to be helpful. And we should keep in mind our long-term goal: that the Russians conclude they are organically a part of Europe, and that they want to be a constructive part of the Continent. That is the ideal outcome. But for now, the "good-enough" outcome is a Russia with which we have more issues bringing us together than driving us apart. And the priorities we share—dealing with North Korea, Afghanistan, terrorism and Iran's nuclear weapons—are vital. Though we may justifiably be separated by disagreements about Russia's internal behavior, realism, again, would dictate that we have to be more concerned with their external behavior than their domestic makeup.

Does America still have the energy to take the lead in addressing these issues?

The United States remains the only country with the ability to coalesce people's goodwill around great enterprises—Russia cannot, China cannot. The European Union may someday have the ability, but for now it also cannot.

America is not in decline. America is not in a state of exhaustion. Of course, we are no longer at the point where we stood almost alone in the world in terms of power. The world has changed. We need to be smarter. We need to realize we cannot accomplish our larger goals unilaterally.

Do you think President Obama will lead us in a more realistic direction?

His general approach thus far is encouraging. As I look at his foreign-policy team, hope does indeed run high. The new team is composed of people who are all serious, intelligent and strong. But all this said,

Obama will need to recognize that a team like this—Jones, Clinton, Biden, Gates and many more—takes strong management, especially in light of all the issues fighting for attention.

If America can get itself oriented properly, gather people and countries of benevolence around us, we can create of the twenty-first century the best that mankind has yet seen. It will take hard work, not idealist romanticism.

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