

An Interview with Richard N. Haass



Should the Bush administration have been better prepared for the national security threats that were crystallized in the attacks of 9/11?

Richard Haass: Armchair quarterbacks or Monday morning quarterbacks might say so. It's fair to say that mainstream national security thinking at that time did not place that high of a priority on terrorism. It wasn't that terrorism was inconceivable, but the scale of it was seen as modest, so people who were working on these issues were not as focused on it as they ought to have been. It took 9/11 to make clear that the nature of the challenge had changed. Hence the comprehensive response from the Intelligence Community, Homeland Security, [Department of] Defense, you name it. It wasn't just the administration—most of the people working in foreign policy or national security did not approach terrorism or counterterrorism pre-9/11 with anything like the intensity that became the new normal after 9/11. Any criticism you would lodge with the Bush administration, you would have lodged with any other administration, and indeed you probably could have lodged with the field at large.

Was the Global War on Terror, in your opinion, an effective and appropriate response to the challenge?

Haass: I never much liked the wording "Global War on Terror." A "war" suggested too many things that were unhelpful. First of all, it suggested that the main instruments were military. Not

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necessarily. Intelligence is at least as important, as are politics, economics, and other tools. Second of all, war connotes concepts of battlefields. With terrorism, anything and everything could be a battlefield. Also, by definition, we were all combatants. You can't choose just to enlist in the War on Terror or choose to opt out. There's no Canada to go to. I never found the image or the jargon—of Global War on Terror, GWOT—helpful, and to some extent it was unhelpful because of the mindset it created.

Was there another construct that could have been used instead that would have been better?

Haass: “Campaign, struggle”—words that suggested something larger than the military and traditional battlefield soldiers. I wouldn't have used anything that was narrowly military. I'd have to think about what produced an acronym or something like that. The main thing is that I would have demilitarized, if you will, the framing of the issue.

But initially, wasn't the U.S. response primarily military?

Haass: Yes and no. The initial effort in Afghanistan, for example, actually had a very large Central Intelligence Agency [CIA] component. What was interesting was how much of the operation was handled by CIA people, in some ways leveraging their relationship with Afghans much more than any large American military footprint. Second of all, the global response was anything but military. It was the big ramping up of intelligence. It was the creation of a much more resilient society. It was efforts to go after terrorist funding. So

again, most of the reactions beyond the narrow battlefield of Afghanistan were actually nonmilitary.

*You've written in your book **War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars** that there is a distinction between the war in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq. Do you consider that the war in Iraq was a diversion from the war of necessity in Afghanistan?*

Haass: Two things. I think more has been made of that than bears scrutiny. One of the criticisms of the Iraq War by those who were against it was that the United States took its eye off the ball. The more I looked at it, I'm not sure if that was true. Yes, some forces were taken out of Afghanistan for Iraq, but just as many forces were inserted into Afghanistan. Second, while a few people in the administration mentioned Iraq in September, October, November, and December 2001, people were not for the most part talking about Iraq. People were focused on Afghanistan. The reasons we didn't do better in Afghanistan were not because of Iraq. Whatever tactical mistakes we made in Tora Bora were not because we were somehow husbanding these forces for Iraq. They were simply tactical mistakes about expecting too much of our “Afghan partners.” I also think that the inclination of the Bush administration not to do more in Afghanistan in 2002 had less to do with Iraq and more to a kind of discomfort if not allergy to doing nation-building in a place like Afghanistan. There was a real sense by Secretary [of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld and others, such as Vice President [Richard] Cheney, that this was not a place to get ambitious. So I actually think if Iraq didn't exist, there was a pretty

powerful argument within the administration that Afghanistan was not a place where a massive investment would likely pay off, which is ironic given that the United States ultimately came to make a massive investment in Afghanistan. In a funny sort of way, some of the skeptics early on will ultimately have their skepticism largely proven right.

The Bush campaign was explicitly opposed to state-building, and yet, after 9/11, the Bush administration engaged in the biggest state-building project since Vietnam. What role should state-building, stabilization, and reconstruction play in U.S. national security policy?

Haass: State-building plays an inevitable role. In a second, I'll condition my answer. We can't do everything ourselves. We need partners. In many cases, the partners may be willing but aren't able; that's where state-building obviously plays a role. We can't be everywhere, particularly if your struggle is against terrorism, where any place is a potential source of a problem. You need host governments that are willing and able to exercise and meet their sovereign responsibilities. In that sense, state-building gives us partners and makes them less vulnerable. So in that sense, and given the inherent limits of how many places we can do things on scale, state-building makes more than a little sense. Where I think state-building gets you in trouble is in times where we don't look enough at willingness as opposed to capability. And state-building to what? What is the definition of *adequacy*? What is the division of labor? What is it we're asking our partner to do as opposed to what we ourselves are prepared to do? I actually think that over the last decade, we have shifted that balance, and we

continue to do elements of state-building. But we've dialed down the expectation on what they will do, and we've dialed up our role from zero, but we've also dialed down our role from the kind of Iraq or Afghanistan large template. So I actually think state-building makes sense, but only if you've got a partner that's willing, if you're quite modest in what you are trying to build them toward, and you're quite modest in what you're prepared to do. We've gotten into trouble when we have defined our goals as too high at what they need to do and too high for what we're prepared to do.

There was a lot of talk over the last decade of the need for an expanded civilian capacity by the U.S. Government to take over inherently civilian roles such as town planners (in expeditionary operations). There was discussion of a civilian reserve corps, a civilian response corps. Do you think that that is an idea past its prime, or do we still need that kind of capacity?

Haass: We made a mistake by assigning way too much to the State Department. It was a real misunderstanding of the culture of the diplomatic corps to ask it to play that kind of boots on the ground, local role. That's not what people join the Foreign Service to do. It's not by and large what they are inclined to do or good at or trained to do or experienced at doing. To think that very quickly you could put some of these people in these remote places—without, by the way, adequate security (because all of this depends on having security)—just seemed seriously flawed, and it's not surprising that it's come to naught. A lot of this has to be scaled back. Almost emblematic of that is the Iraq presence. You look at the scale of the Embassy, you look at

the thinking of the civilian presence. No way that's going to happen. We're not welcome in those numbers. We don't have the manpower. We don't have the security. We need some of this function, but it ought to be far more modest, and we ought not to look in the first instance to the Foreign Service to do it. I was one of the advocates of a civilian reserve, and it was very much modeled on the military Reserve. You would have people in our civilian society who were known to have certain capabilities—police officers, firefighters, engineers, language teachers, and people with local languages—who could make societies work. They, like the military, would train up for a couple of months at the outset and then have refreshers maybe a weekend every month, i.e., whatever you needed to develop and to maintain skill levels. These would be people who would then be prepared in the right conditions to go overseas. I would have created a special corps to do that, and I would not have asked the Foreign Service to do it. I would have had a small standing capability, whether located at State or Defense, or you stand up some new small agency that would have that express function. I still think that makes sense even if the overall numbers are probably less or more modest than people were thinking.

Stuart Bowen, the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, has been advocating for and has written in this journal in favor of an independent agency for reconstruction and stabilization.

Haass: I'm not familiar with that, but that sort of thing makes more than a little sense to me. I also think that there's a lesson in the State Department experience. It's something that I remember learning and then teaching at the

Kennedy School: Whenever you ask an organization to take on a new task, you should be very wary about asking it to take on a task that's more than one step removed from its existing task. You really ought to build on existing culture, existing standard operating procedures, and then you can ask it to do it. What people were asking the Foreign Service to do was multiple steps removed from its culture. That ought to have raised a red flag.

In November 2005, the Department of Defense issued Directive 3000.05 ["Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations"]. It specifically stated that while the military would prefer for civilian agencies to do all these jobs, if they failed to step up to the plate, the military would do it and in fact, in Iraq, they did. Is the military a viable place to retain those kinds of capabilities?

Haass: The short answer is it's a possibility, but at a certain cost. We've only got a military of a certain size, and there are other things that only the military can do, that they are uniquely equipped literally and figuratively to do. You have to ask yourself, do you want them then to take on these other tasks? I also think there's a certain symbolic issue there. At times we want to have a transition, and there's something to be said that we're now civilianizing the American presence. That's another argument for not having the military do this. The military has wars to fight. There are things they can uniquely do. One of the reasons the Bush administration early on was against state-building was because so much of state-building was done by people trained for the military, trained to fight wars, and then we ask them to do a civilian function. If you're

asking people to do predominantly civilian functions, then you probably want to have predominantly civilians doing them.

The 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States of America made a significant point when it stated that we have as much to fear from weak and failing states in terms of threats to national security as we do from peer adversaries. Do you agree with that assessment?

Haass: I believe that that is one of the characteristics of this world. So much of 20th-century history was about powerful states, or to use Henry Kissinger's language, "revolutionary states." They wanted to overturn the international system of the day, whether it was Germany at two points in the 20th century or the Soviet Union later on. At the moment I don't see any country out there with a global reach that has those kinds of ambitions. I'm not saying it couldn't happen, but at the moment, there's no 21st-century equivalent of a revolutionary Germany or Soviet Union. I'm much more concerned about weak states. I'm also concerned about some strong, medium-size states—North Korea and Iran. They can pose real threats to regional borders with global repercussions. Weak states are what people ought to be concerned about because in a global world, what happens within weak states can have global consequences, whether it is the use of their territory for terrorism or the transit of certain types of materials, be it drugs or nuclear weaponry or disease. Pandemic disease could very well come out of a weak state that doesn't have monitoring or related types of capabilities. Then there is piracy. These are legitimate threats. If states are weak and the challenges sufficient, they can get hijacked.

Lebanon to some extent is a classic weak state that has been taken over by a nonstate actor called Hizballah. Weak states are a real concern in the case of terrorism with a global reach.

Going back to our discussion of Iraq and Afghanistan, what is your diagnosis of the problems in the interagency process that resulted in so many controversies within the U.S. Government during operations in Iraq?

Haass: The biggest problem was that early on the Defense Department was given the responsibility to oversee the aftermath, and the center, the National Security Council, didn't have proper oversight. For many people in the Pentagon, their approach to the aftermath was driven by assumptions. Well, it turned out that none of those assumptions was correct about how taxing it would be, the kinds of capabilities and tactics that would be required, and the nature of Iraqi society. The problem was to some extent corrected when the White House regained control over policymaking. But up to then, there was a lack of central oversight and the organization that was given responsibility did not go about it in a competent way.

Now that we're about to leave Afghanistan and many people have already forgotten we were ever in Iraq, what's your assessment of the impact on America's global stature in terms of our ability to influence global outcomes of our engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Haass: Actually, not that great. There is a pattern among people in this field to exaggerate the lasting repercussions of either successes or failures, and it gets to the heart, to some extent, of the credibility argument. You look

at Vietnam, and it was in many ways a defeat, but within a generation the U.S. position in Asia was extraordinarily strong. The United States was the most influential country in the region, still had a tremendous presence in the Pacific, still had a presence on the Asian mainland in Korea. The failure in Vietnam did not set off this enormous geopolitical wave. When it comes to Iraq and Afghanistan, however the United States is perceived, I don't think people around the world, when they get up in the morning and go to their desks or offices in whatever foreign ministry or presidential office, are looking at the United States through the prism of Iraq and Afghanistan. I think they're looking at us through the prism of our economy, political process, or more recent events. They want to see what we are or are not doing about this or that situation in the Arab world or North Korea. In terms of lasting geopolitical consequences, they (Iraq and Afghanistan) drained our treasury to some extent, they drained our military to some extent, and they distracted us. They distorted American national security policy for a decade by placing such a large emphasis on the greater Middle East. They've detracted to some extent from a perception of competence. I'm not saying there's no impact, but I don't see anything happening that couldn't be recouped very quickly.

Would you include in that our reputation within the Arab Muslim world, specifically in respect to our values—democracy, human rights, those sorts of things?

Haass: Within the Arab Muslim world, there are so many other things that are affecting the way the United States is perceived. For example, how the United States acted in Egypt and Libya, and what we are or are not doing in

Syria or Iran. If you go to Bahrain, they want to know what we're doing about the internal situation in Bahrain. For others it might be the Palestinian issue. All I'm saying is that there are any number of issues out there, and I don't think that somehow these concerns you mention are necessarily dominant in the Muslim world. In Pakistan, these are not the dominant concerns. It's much more what the United States is doing or not doing in Pakistan. Politics is local, and again there is a tendency among analysts to exaggerate the precedential impact of what it is we do and don't do. To me it's slightly reassuring because it means two things. One, even when we make mistakes, we can bounce back from them. Second, we don't have to pour good money after bad simply because people are worried that if we somehow don't see something through as much as some want, that we create a terrible precedent. I'm not saying there's no truth to that argument, but it tends to be exaggerated in that the United States will always have opportunities to act if it wants. Even if it chooses to put a limit on its actions in place A, the United States has opportunities to change perceptions of the United States in places B, C, and D very quickly.

Do you think that our experience in Iraq and Afghanistan led to a better national integration of the various elements of national power in the Arab Spring, say, for example, in our reaction to Egypt?

Haass: I don't see that as really connected. Iraq and Afghanistan have had some very positive implications for how we think about our engagement militarily in these kinds of situations. As institutions, the military, and the U.S. Army in particular, are great learners. I've always been impressed by that. They are

as systematic at learning as any organizations in American society—very professional, really admirable. The Army and military in general are admirable in the way they train people beforehand and throughout their careers. They learn from successes and failures alike. The civilian sector, both the nonprofit and for-profit sectors, could learn an extraordinary amount from the way the military deals with its people and deals with experience. They've learned a lot of lessons, but I don't think we've been very good at integrating the civilian and military elements of American capability.

The Arab Spring is not a phrase I like. I never use it because it's certainly not lasting for 3 months and it's not obvious to me that it's going to be positive. I tend to be someone who enjoys spring, and I don't think that I'll necessarily enjoy what comes to pass. I prefer words like "upheavals" or "intifada." It's a very different set of diplomatic calculations and it's more the classic set of tensions between often specific interests—economic, security, what have you—associated with regimes that are somewhat authoritarian. They might be to some degree reformist, but they are also somewhat authoritarian and they're challenged from people below. We're not always sure what the agendas are of the people who are challenging them, and we're also not always sure who will necessarily prevail. It is a classic faultline in foreign policy: to what extent does one think about the behavior of countries as opposed to their nature. It's an extraordinarily difficult tactical situation, as we saw in Egypt or as we're seeing in Bahrain, which is how you play your hand when you've got these various moving parts. There's a price to be paid from supporting the governments. There's a price to be paid for moving away from them. I found this difficult strategically and tactically,

but they're different situations than the sort of thing we had in Iraq or Afghanistan.

How do you think we should be playing it in Syria right now?

Haass: The United States has clear humanitarian interests in stopping the fighting and getting rid of this government, and we have clear strategic interests given its connections with Iran. Strategic and humanitarian interests are often in some kind of competition. Well, here they're actually aligned very closely. On both grounds you'd love to see this regime gone. If there ever was a moment for a diplomatic settlement, it's over, if by that you mean the regime can remain and by-gones will be by-gones. Way too much blood has been spilled. This regime has lost its legitimacy. It's for that reason that I think the diplomatic mission conducted by the United Nations was flawed. The regime needs to go. I don't know how much of it needs to go. Now you can no longer have an Alawite-run Syria. Those days are over. The moment may have existed early on where if there had been a decapitation, a regime change at the top, large elements of a reformist successor regime could have survived, but I think that's over.

Now the political future of Syria is much more wide open and will hopefully be determined by some kind of widespread political participation, so there would be tolerance, a safe place for minorities, and there would not be the politics of vengeance and retribution. One of the reasons that change hasn't happened is that the Alawites aren't persuaded of it. One of the failures so far is that the opposition has not put forward a credible agenda that reassures the Alawites of Syria that they are not going to suffer, to put it bluntly, the same fate

as the Sunnis in Iraq. A minority that had the upper hand is not suddenly going to fall, given their fear not just of becoming disenfranchised but of being physically attacked, losing their homes or their lives, which is what happened to many Sunnis in Iraq. I would put as much emphasis as I could on creating an opposition that would send a credible political message to the effect that there's a place in Syria for all Syrians, and that except for a very narrow layer, there would not be war crimes charges. I would put a great emphasis on that political message. I want to peel away most of the regime supporters, Alawite as well as Sunni, who are behind this regime. I want to up the sanctions. I want to send positive messages of political reassurance; these need to come from the Syrian opposition. I want there to be war crimes threats lodged against people who are helping Bashar al-Asad in a significant way. I want these people to know that they have got to choose and that they have got to move away from him, or they will end up dead or on trial and in prison.

I would be helping the opposition, and I would consider specific, limited transfers of anti-air or anti-armor weapons to select individuals or groups we had confidence in, but all things being equal, arms do not appear to be what the opposition lacks most. First of all, I'm not sure having an all-out civil war will bring forth the kind of opposition we want. I would look for ways through covert operations or military operations to stop arms from reaching the government. I would try everything to prevent that. It would be another sanction, and I'd look for a way to physically enforce it. I would basically do just about everything I could both to create a positive opposition and to weaken and isolate the government. This regime's days are numbered. I don't believe we will want or need to mount

a "Libya operation," which would be problematic given their ability to resist as well as questions of consolidation in the aftermath. I actually think there's a pretty good chance that this will unravel pretty quickly from within if we set up the right context.

Arms embargo, enhanced sanctions, war crimes at the top layer, no-fly zones, sanctuaries. This reminds me of post-Desert Storm, our approach to Iraq. How would you do it differently from what we did in the 90s in Iraq?

Haass: But Iraq was not at that point; the big emphasis there was not on regime change. The 90s in Iraq were really about containment—to keep Saddam Hussein in his box. It actually succeeded fairly well. In Syria, there will have to be a regime change. I would pointedly go after that.

Because the regime in Syria today is fundamentally worse than the Saddam regime was in the 90s or . . . ?

Haass: They're both awful in their own way. Ideally, Saddam would have gone sooner. There was a strategic assumption that he would fall in the aftermath of *Desert Storm*, but he survived. But we never gave up on regime change there; as you know, there were various efforts to do so. Regime change was always the most desirable policy, but the fallback was at least containment. The Syrian situation is unsustainable, and we need to look harder at what more we can do to bring about change.

Going back to process, over the last decade, the homage paid to the whole-of-government approach, the comprehensive

approach, the 3Ds, has been virtually religious in tone. In your time in government and since you left government, have you seen any improvements in the way that the government's defense, diplomacy, and development communities work together?

Haass: No.

Is this due to that perennial problem, parochialism?

Haass: It's hard to generalize. A lot depends on the specific incidents. I don't think it's the kind of thing that lends itself to systemic change. By that I mean—and this administration ended up spending a lot of time on it—there is no bureaucratic change or reform that can solve this problem. You have to bring together the right people, the right policy on individual issues. For example, years ago in the Reagan administration, people from various agencies dealt very effectively with political change in the Philippines. We've had successes in the U.S. Government. I tend not to be the reorganizational type; I don't have that bias. It means having an interagency process that works with talented people. Things worked, for example, under George H.W. Bush, when Brent Scowcroft was National Security Advisor. Certain things worked pretty well, not everything, but certain things worked pretty well without systemic reorganization. There is an American bias toward systemic organization that will "solve the problems." That's an American cultural bias. Whether it's homeland security or intelligence, we tend to move a lot of boxes around and create new layers. I'm not sure that's the way to go about these things. A lot of it is cultural. The fact that data or intelligence

are not always shared cannot necessarily be solved organizationally. It might have to be solved culturally. It might take certain individuals and certain leadership. I'm just skeptical every time I hear about organizational or institutional approaches or fixes. It tends to be too top-down.

What is your assessment of the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review?

Haass: I am frankly skeptical that it will lead to significant changes.

In the recently released Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense, there's an indication of a strategic pivot toward Asia and the Pacific. Do you think that is a wise move?

Haass: I'm not wild about the word "pivot." It's too sharp. I think two things. The United States has been overly invested in the greater Middle East, and I do think it has been strategically distorting. The investments both in Iraq and in Afghanistan have been way too big, and our interests did not warrant it. The opportunities there, the dangers there, didn't warrant it. I'm glad to see a slight dialing down or considerable dialing down of the American military presence in the greater Middle East. We'll see what happens with Iran. That could be a temporary exception. All things being equal, the era of a large American footprint in the greater Middle East is over and should be over.

The idea that there will be some dialing up of some U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific, particularly air and naval, is healthy. It's an enormous theater, and it's the part of the

world where a lot more 21st-century history is going to be written. It is the Asia-Pacific that brings together the great powers of this era and vital U.S. interests. This is not reactive; in some way this is more preventive. We ought to be there. I welcome that. I welcome a slight shift in investment toward the Air Force and Navy. The end strength of the Army and Marines will probably go back somewhere close to where they were 10 years ago. We are going to move to a “lighter footprint” in dealing with terrorism and state-building.

The one large exception in the Asia-Pacific is North Korea. That’s one area where I can imagine a large land war. Needless to say, I hope it never happens, but it’s obviously conceivable. So we need to think about it in that context. All things being equal, do I think a slight “rebalancing”—a word I prefer rather than pivot—away from the Middle East toward the Asia-Pacific is healthy? Yes. We have been rebalancing away from Europe for 20-odd years. We probably have one-quarter the American presence we had 25 years ago. That makes sense. We have virtually no fixed presence in Africa and Latin America. That makes sense.

This is a world of great dynamism, where we don’t have any set or predictable foe as we did during the 20th century. In a funny sort of way, we ought to go back to lots of mobility, perhaps some kind of CONUS [contiguous or continental United States]–based pool of forces that could be dispatched to different places and trained. When the rapid deployment force was first developed, I was in the Pentagon. This is the late 70s, circa 1979–1980. It was a CONUS-based force and it had a global mission. Only when the greater Middle East became this new theater of great concern did the rapid deployment force essentially

go from being a global force to essentially a regional force, which ultimately morphed into U.S. Central Command. I think the time has come to some extent to undo some of that and to make it more what it was, more of a global contingency reserve. We have more air and naval presence in Asia, but essentially if we are concerned about global efforts against terrorism, we ought to be highly flexible. We’re not quite sure what the next scenario is going to look like. In some ways, we need to add flexibility into our ability to deploy.

So in the current debate between those who advocate for retaining this terrorism-counterterrorism expeditionary capacity and those who argue for antiaccess/area denial, you would say you can’t choose one or the other?

Haass: They’re both right. If we were to choose, we would almost certainly be wrong. History suggests you never want to overload your eggs in a basket, particularly now when there’s so much fluidity in international relations. There’s so much fluidity in history. None of us can sit here and say this is exactly the trajectory of Russia or China or India or Europe or Japan, or whether there will be regime change in Iran or Korea in 5 or 10 years. None of us knows the answers to these questions. We need to build into our forces and into our national security policy in general tremendous adaptability. This is not unlike investment. You wouldn’t want to have a portfolio of all equities or all bonds or all anything else. You want to protect yourself against all sorts of unknowns and uncertainties. The same thing applies to strategy. This is one of the most fluid moments in international relations, so we need to have

tremendous flexibility for strategic reasons and given technological innovation. This is also not a time that you want to make decades-long investments or bets because something may come along in 2 or 3 years that may be really transformative. You want to build in flexibility at this moment in history.

Can you comment on the process for formulating U.S. national security strategy?

Haass: The government has its own formal process because of Goldwater-Nichols [Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986], and that's of some limited utility. But by and large, governments aren't good, or groups aren't good, at "big think." That's actually a role for outsiders to government. That's what think tanks, people who think strategically, ought to be doing. It's what people do in war colleges. It's what people do on planning staffs. The idea that an interagency committee is going to think of a grand strategy—no, that's not going to happen. Containment didn't come out of a committee. Containment came out of an individual, an extraordinarily talented individual. Ultimately, ideas have to be vetted by governments and internalized by governments. Policies have to be designed and then implemented by governments. But ideas don't by and large come *out* of governments. Ideas come *to* governments. That is, from individuals. It could be an individual in government, but more likely an individual outside of government. That's a much more realistic creative process. [PRISM](#)