

The Scouting Report – Restore American Leadership to Address Transnational Threats

Live Web Chat with Brookings Vice President Carlos Pascual and *Politico* Editor John Ward Anderson

January 14, 2009

12:28 John Ward Anderson:

Greetings all, and thanks for joining us. I'm John Anderson, a senior editor at Politico, and I'll be moderating today's session of the Scouting Report with Brookings vice president and director of foreign policy Carlos Pascual. I've got a million questions but we want to hear from you, too. But at the start, I'm declaring moderator prerogative, which mean I get the first question. Carlos, one topic the Brookings website says we're going to discuss is "how president-elect Barack Obama can restore credible American leadership." That seems to suggest that US leadership is not credible. And I'm wondering what, specifically, led to its disintegration? Is this all the Bush administration's over reliance on military solutions and its seeming disdain for diplomacy and multilateral institutions? Has the nature of the challenges changed? In a more globalized, borderless world, is it harder for a superpower to flex its muscle and rally its allies?

12:30 Carlos Pascual:

In order to regain credibility and leadership the US must recognize that we no longer dominate the international environment and act unilaterally.

12:30 Carlos Pascual:

The US must understand that its leadership will depend on partnerships and international cooperation.

12:32 Carlos Pascual:

One important step the US must take is to reaffirm its commitment to human rights. That includes re-establishing its firm commitment to the Genva Convention and the convention on torture. And to underscore that it will abide by a rule based international system.

12:33 Carlos Pascual:

The US must also recognize the nature of the problems we face today - nuclear security, climate change, transnational terrorism, international financial instability. Issues that do not recognize borders. In order to make progress on any of these issues the US must work with others.

12:34 Carlos Pascual:

Hence we come back to the point which President Obama has underscored, that American security is tied to global security. The US alone cannot succeed, and that will require investments in international partnerships and cooperation.

12:35 John Ward Anderson :

Okay, I get a follow-up, and then we'll turn to our other chatters. Carlos, if Obama wants to signal that the US is aiming to restore its leadership role, what specifically can he do right out of the box to put the world on notice? Close Gitmo? Become a card-carrying member of the World Court of Justice? Embrace the goals of the Kyoto Protocol?

12:39 Carlos Pascual:

Closing Gitmo would obviously be an important symbolic gesture, demonstrating that the US is taking a ruled based approach for the Administration and justice. It's important to think about these symbolic gestures, including those that I mentioned earlier. The Geneva convention and the convention on torture. But these are just a starting point. The international community will be watching closely. Affecting every country is the global economic crisis, and how the US resists to protectionism will have a huge impact on international perceptions of US commitment to an open international system.

12:41 Carlos Pascual:

Another major issue is climate change, and whether the US will engage in good faith to reach agreement on a post Kyoto framework to reduce greenhouse gasses. If the US, which is responsible for the largest per capita emissions in the world, does not commit itself to such a framework, it simply will not be possible to succeed.

12:41 [Comment From Josh G., Georgetown]

What's the link between climate change and global/U.S. security? I understand that climate change is a threat to the planet, but how does the issue play out as a security issue?

12:44 Reader Poll

Do you think Barack Obama is prepared to revitalize American leadership in the international system?

Yes (100%)

No (0%)

12:46 Carlos Pascual:

Climate change has a major and direct impact on local and regional conflicts creating greater pressure on the availability of land and water. One might think about Darfur as the first climate change war and we will see similar trends occur throughout the Sahel and through other parts of the world where human pressures on land and water availability are intense. Climate change will also have major impacts on the very viability of countries and regions throughout the world. Imagine for example Bangladesh under water and the migration flows that will result, into already volatile surrounding countries. Within the western hemisphere, we will see greater migration pressures into the United States and greater tensions in areas such as the southwest where land and water are already scarce.

12:47 [Comment From David in MD]

What are the chances that the U.S. and China will begin to actively work towards addressing climate change?

12:51 Carlos Pascual:

The United States and China are already working on climate change issues, the challenge will be to reach an understanding that reflects the interests of both countries to sustain their economic growth while also radically changing patters of fossil fuel consumption. While China has emerged as the largest emitter of green house gases, the levels of per capita emissions are far lower than those in the United States nor did China contribute to the industrial revolution that caused the carbon concentrations in the atmosphere that are the source of global warming. That explains why China has placed such emphasis on its right to grow and the importance of technology transfer as a critical means to resolve these issues. The United States will have to face internally the reality

that every nation has confronted: that it must place a price on carbon in order to restrict carbon emissions and stimulate innovation and investment. Doing so will be particularly hard in the near term because of the global and American economic recession that will cause resistance to any measures that constrain growth in sectors such as steel, aluminum, and automobiles. So two key factors in eventually reaching effective cooperation between China and the U.S. will be 1) real cooperation on technology dissemination including the financing for the commercialization for these technologies and 2) developing measures to support displaced populations who may lose their jobs in the near term as measures to constrain carbon emissions are initially put in place.

12:53 [Comment From Roland (Baltimore)]

I understand that reform of the United Nations is essential, but I am skeptical of the role UN in major global crises. You have an institution that seems to act more as a platform for rogue nations to air their grievances as opposed to problem solving dealing with crisis such as genocide. The UN may have a responsibility to protect, but it has been absent in Darfur allowing millions to die. Why have a UN security council that passes resolutions that are meaningless?

12:56 Reader Poll

Do you think institutions like the United Nations and summits like the G8 and G20 are effective?

Yes (75%)

No (25%)

12:57 Carlos Pascual:

Skepticism is always appropriate in dealing with the United Nations. It is an indispensable institution, yet it is an institution that was created at a time when the world operated very differently and where its purpose was to ensure nations scrutinized each other to prevent transgression across borders. Today, the global problems that we face are very different and require different political and operational instruments with investments by the world's major countries in order to be able to act effectively. Yet even with these limitations, the UN has made a major difference in many areas, particularly in peacekeeping and state building. Even with minimal resources, the UN has played critical roles in supporting peace missions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Bosnia, Kosovo, Lebanon, East Timor, El Salvador, and we can name others. These are not all perfect and today we see the limitations of the UN's capabilities in Congo but we need to recognize the blame is just not that of the UN. The UN consists of its members states. When the United States, the European Powers, and other states with major military capability, don't contribute to international peacekeeping, we leave the bulk of the challenge to countries such as China, India, and Pakistan. So, yes, we should criticize the UN and identify its weaknesses, but we should invest in strengthening its capabilities that will in the long-term be in our interest.

12:57 John Ward Anderson:

two questions from matthew:

12:58 [Comment From Matthew]

How much does the U.S. gov't.'s approval of Israel's invasion of Gaza hurt our image in the Middle East?

12:58 [Comment From Matthew]

What should Obama do in restore the image of the United States in the Middle East?

1:03 Carlos Pascual:

There is not one simple action that can be taken to improve the U.S. image in the Middle East but there are a number of policies and actions that can help. The first is re-affirming America's commitment to human rights and ensuring that we will no longer engage in torture and the types of violations of human dignity that damaged America's perception throughout the world but particularly in the Middle East. A second step is to engage seriously and immediately in seeking a ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinians and working toward a two-state solution. Perhaps that may seem out of the question in today's environment of conflict, but the U.S. must demonstrate it is willing to work with its partners in the quartet to get beyond the current crisis. For the U.S., this will mean dealing very frankly with the Israeli authorities. A third step will be to abandon talk of a global war on terror. Terrorism is indeed an international problem but the characterization of a "global war" has been seen as anti-Muslim and has made it harder to work effectively with Muslim partners that must be part of the solution. In Iraq, the U.S. needs to work much more aggressively to supporting a viable long-term political understanding among all ethnic groups. Doing so will require engaging with the UN in a serious and sustained manner. It will also mean affirming consistently that the United States has no intention to establish long-term military bases in Iraq. These are just starting points but they can begin to generate greater credibility and as that credibility emerges, that will create new possibilities for more effective engagement in the region.

1:03 [Comment From Virginia from Atlanta]

It seems like the Russians are getting more bold and belligerent every day. It almost feels like the old Cold War days. What tack should Obama take with Russia?

1:06 John Ward Anderson:

While Carlos is typing, I wonder what you chatters out there think of the situation in Gaza. Some think that perhaps the US should open a dialogue with Hamas, Others support the Bush policy of setting conditions (for instance, recognizing Israel) before talking with the group, think not. What do you think?

1:09 [Comment From Matthew]

I think that a policy that freezes out stakeholders only makes the situation worse!

1:09 Carlos Pascual:

The United States has demonstrated, tragically, that unilateralism does not work as a foreign policy. Russia would do well to learn from our mistakes and to reconsider how it works with its neighbors and the rest of the international community in a more cooperative fashion. Within six months, Russia will find itself in an acute economic and financial crisis. Already it has suffered from the collapse of oil prices. Its construction sector has come to a stand-still. So has transportation and automobile manufacturing. In the past months, Russia may have spent close to 200 billion dollars to avert even further devaluation of the ruble. It cannot sustain this and will have to devalue in the coming weeks. This will have an acute impact on businesses and individuals throughout Russia that hold loans denominated in foreign currency. As their payments increase by 30-50 percent, they will begin to default and banks will come under the kind of pressure that we have seen in the U.S., Europe and elsewhere. Russia is not prepared to handle this massive contraction of its financial sector. This year it will likely run a massive deficit in its budget. So the kind of energy driven aggressiveness that we

have seen of late in Russia may indeed correct itself but the more painful lesson for Russia is to recognize that it depends on what happens in the rest of the international system and that it cannot act without regard to its neighbors, and that indeed needs the financing, investment, and friendship that the rest of the world have to offer.

1:09 [Comment From Sungwon, DC]

What kind of lessons can be learned by the Obama administration from the Bush administration on North Korea policy?

1:13 Reader Poll

Should the Obama administration hold direct talks with Iran?

Yes (60%)

No (40%)

1:15 Carlos Pascual:

North Korea is a tough case because it is almost predictable in its unpredictability as a state actor. Yet that said, we have been better off engaging with North Korea, verifying as we go and sustaining coordinated pressure from the surrounding states, particularly China, rather than acting unilaterally. Our first mistake in North Korea was to suspend our engagement over a suspected HEU enrichment program that has never been verified. This led eventually to no international supervision of North Korea's nuclear programs, including those facilities that were known to us, where international monitors had been present and which in the end, became the source of producing the nuclear material that North Korea has used in producing a nuclear weapon. Because North Korea has demonstrated that it cannot be trusted, and because it has nuclear technology, that heightens even further the imperative to maintain an international presence. The other key lesson was to coordinate action with the surrounding states, particularly those who have commercial leverage with North Korea. It was after China in particular led an effort to impose UN sanctions against North Korea after it tested a nuclear weapon in October 2006 that it was again possible to begin constructive negotiations. There will be ups and downs in these negotiations - we should expect that. We cannot be complacent but to simply disengage would be a more dangerous outcome as we saw in the period of 2005-2006.

1:15 John Ward Anderson:

One of the Bush administration's chief transnational goals was the spread of democracy. How would you judge its success? Spreading democracy seems like a laudable goal. Why didn't it gain more traction? Is it something the Obama administration should pursue?

1:16 John Ward Anderson:

And while Carlos is answering that, anyone have thoughts on what country Obama should visit on his first overseas trip? Pretty symbolic.....

1:18 [Comment From Sean]

Obama should announce that he is going to withdraw troops from Iraq... in Iraq.

1:20 [Comment From Roland (Baltimore)]

Russia

1:21 Carlos Pascual:

The Bush administration failed in its goal of democracy promotion. In part that was because it did not reflect the true nature of democratic transition in developing a strategy to support and advance democracy. Rather, it based its views on ideology and rhetoric -- suggesting democracy could be imposed from above without recognizing that in order to be sustained, it must grow and be viable within states and nurtured by local actors. Inevitably democracy promotion must be incorporated into bilateral policies that at times will pit seemingly conflicting objectives against one another. In authoritarian states in the Middle East, for example, we want to support democracy, but we also seek support for the ME peace process, counterterrorism and energy security. It is impossible to avoid contact with some of the very bodies that may be seen at the heart of enforcing authoritarian regimes. Therefore, to succeed in democracy promotion, we have to engage authoritarian leaders on these issues, we have to press them to allow the political space that allows democracy to emerge from within. We have to explain to local populations why we continue to engage with authoritarian regimes, and ideally we have to engage with other regional and international actors that can work with us to advance such political messages but also to provide support to emerging democratic movements and to reinforce the rule-of-law. Promoting democracy is not an American creation, the principle of democratic rights is fundamentally established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has been one of the core documents of the UN since the 1940s. We should not drop democracy promotion as a tool of American foreign policy but we need to be strategic and realistic in order to advance it effectively.

1:22 [Comment From Adam in DC]

What additional sanctions can the Obama administration utilize in pressuring Iran to draw down its nuclear program?

1:25 John Ward Anderson:

I think the important thing about sanctions is that the US work to make sure they are supported by its allies. Too many times the US gets stuck out on a limb supporting sanctions that do not have full support and therefore are full of loopholes. And the sanctions have met with only limited success. Perhaps some sort of limited engagement policy is in order, which both Obama and Hillary yesterday seemed to support.

1:30 Carlos Pascual:

Sanctions must be a part of the international strategy toward Iran but sanctions alone will not achieve the goals that we seek particularly to ensure that Iran permanently foregoes the development of nuclear weapons. The Bush Administration in its final months established the principle of American participation in negotiations with Iran in the context of a wider body that includes the permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany. We should continue this and so doing, we reduce the perception that the United States is focused only on regime change in Iran and we open prospects to engage other international actors, including Muslim countries such as Indonesia in making clear international opposition to Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon. The U.S. and its international partners must continue to reaffirm that they are willing to help Iran acquire and implement a civilian nuclear power program that has appropriate international safeguards. The prospect needs to be raised with Iran on how it can be better integrated with a regional and global economy. In addition, prospects should be raised for a wider Middle East security arrangement that provides security assurances to all the countries in the region-- a role comparable to the CSCE in the 1970s in Europe. If these positive measures can be outlined, then the international community will have a stronger position in underscoring that if Iran continues toward the path of a nuclear

weapon, that the international community has no choice but to interpret that Iran's purpose cannot be peaceful and that stronger and accelerated sanctions will need to be put in place. Iran, for example, imports most of its refined fuel products and could find its transport sector at a stand-still without access to gasoline imports. Already the Iranian economy is under stress with the collapse with global oil prices. The Iranian people are already angry with their own government for their misuse of the oil resources which could have been put to positive use for the prosperity of the country. If the international community can make clear that these resources were wasted for no purpose-- namely that the international community does not designs against Iran -- that might be one of the most effective ways in which to facilitate Iranian internal political pressures so that Iran begins to correct its own course.

1:30 John Ward Anderson:

That's a wrap everybody. Thanks so much for a lively chat, and for bearing with us as we grappled with a few technical challenges. Special thanks to Carlos for his time and thoughtful answers.

1:31 John Ward Anderson:

Check us out next week for some reflections on the inaugural address!