Foreign Policy Challenges Facing the Obama Administration

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As president and founder of the Scowcroft Group and one of the country’s leading experts on international policy, Brent Scowcroft provides unparalleled strategic advice and assistance in dealing in the international arena.

Scowcroft has served as the national security advisor to presidents Ford and Bush. From 1982 to 1989 he was vice chair of Kissinger Associates, Inc., an international consulting firm. In this capacity he advised and assisted a wide range of U.S. and foreign corporate leaders on global joint venture opportunities, strategic planning, and risk assessment.

Scowcroft’s extraordinary 29-year military career began with graduation from West Point and concluded with his achieving the rank of lieutenant general following service as the deputy national security advisor. His air force service includes being a Russian history assistant professor at West Point; assistant air attaché in Belgrade, Yugoslavia; head of the political science department at the Air Force Academy; involvement in air force long-range plans; working in international security assistance for the Office of the Secretary of Defense; serving as special assistant to the director of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and serving as military assistant to President Nixon.

Out of uniform Scowcroft has continued in a public policy capacity by serving on the president’s advisory committee on arms control, the commission on strategic forces, and the president’s special review board, also known as the Tower Commission.

Scowcroft currently serves on numerous corporate and nonprofit boards. He earned his master’s degree and PhD in international relations from Columbia University.
I’m going to talk to you tonight about foreign policy challenges facing the new administration. That, of course, could keep us here all night, but my goal is modest. It’s not to solve all of the country’s problems for it but hopefully to shed some light on some of the more important and some of the more complex and intractable problems we face, as well as the environment in which these problems are embedded. This is a complicated and confusing world we live in. It reminds me of the story of the woman who went to her lawyer to get a divorce.

The lawyer said, “Well, all right. Do you have grounds?”

And she said, “Oh, yes, about an acre.”

The lawyer said, “No, no. I mean do you have a grudge?”

She said, “No, we park on the street.”

And he said, “Well, for example, does your husband beat you up?”

She said, “No, I get up at 4:30 every morning.”

The lawyer threw up his hands and said, “Well, what is your problem?”

And she said, “We just don’t seem to be able to communicate.”

So that’s partly the world in which we live. It’s hard to communicate, and sometimes it’s hard to receive.

The new administration, the new president, came into this world facing, I think, three general tasks. The first task was to change the mood: the mood in the country and the mood toward the United States. Polling at the International Pew Institute around the world on attitudes toward the United States shows that almost never before has the United States been in such disfavor around the world. That’s a huge burden because we’ve never been renowned for skillful foreign policy, but everybody thought we were trying to do our best, so we got the benefit of the doubt. That’s a big help when you’re trying to get things done. At the time of Obama’s inauguration, we were no longer getting the benefit of the doubt; we were considered just like everybody else, pursuing our own narrow self-interests. So that’s the first task he had. The second task was to come to grips with a very complicated and rapidly changing world, the environment in which we live and in which decisions have to be made. And the third task was dealing with specific problems themselves.

President Obama has, I think, wisely spent his time on the first of those tasks in his early days in office, and I think he’s done a good job. He is a gifted speaker. He speaks from the heart, and I think he has done more than I would have imagined possible
to change the mood, especially the mood toward the United States. He has given important speeches in Prague, in Istanbul, in Cairo, and at the United Nations. In each of those speeches he has set a tone for the way the United States intends to deal with the world that I think has done much toward giving us the kind of receptive environment which we always used to enjoy as we tried to make our way.

Task number two is much more amorphous, and it’s a task which can’t really be solved, but it surrounds every problem we face and the means we seek to deal with those problems, and that is the environment in which we operate. Right now the world is about to celebrate the anniversary of the Berlin Wall coming down, of the unification of Germany. That is the mark of a world in historical discontinuity. The end of the Cold War marked a dramatic change (though not for young people, because that’s ancient history). Seldom has the world been so transformed in its outlook. The world of the Cold War was a desperately dangerous world. We were living in an existential threat; that is, a serious mistake by either the Warsaw Pact or NATO could have blown up both sides and perhaps the world. But within that framework, it was a very structured world, and we had a single enemy. We knew a lot about it, we focused on it, our institutions were designed to deal with it, and in that way it was a fairly regular world. Then historically, in the blink of an eye, that world disappeared. The threat of nuclear war vanished, and instead there was a world without any great threat but with a number of little irritating problems—problems which we had just brushed aside in the heat of the Cold War. It was like looking through different ends of the telescope. But that change in itself, dramatic though it was, is only part of what is going on, because there is a historic process of transformation going on in the world today.

That transformation comes under the heading of that much overused word globalization—globalization not as a policy but as a pervasive force in the world. Issues and forces like flows of capital, health issues, climate change, and information technology are defying national borders and can be controlled only through international cooperation. States can no longer provide unilaterally for their citizens in the manner to which they have become accustomed.

Some of these forces, such as information technology, have specific impacts. Information technology has politicized the world’s people. For most of mankind, most people knew what was going on in their own village or city and maybe the neighborhood, but not much else, and they didn’t care much. The big issues of empire and so on just flowed right on by them; they were not engaged. Now almost everyone in the world is within earshot of a radio or in eyesight of a television. They see it, they hear it, and it energizes them. They look at a screen and they say, “I’m living in this squalor? Why am I not living like those people there?” Or, “These people say this about me? They must be bad people.” All of these things are creating a world of instant knowledge—not understanding, but instant information about what is going on. It is not an accident
that we are preoccupied by terrorism in a way the world never has been before, because that is part of this phenomenon brought about by the information revolution.

In addition, globalization is resulting in an assault on the whole nation-state system. That system was set up in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, and it reached its zenith in the 19th and 20th centuries. The state was the political instrument through which people managed themselves and struggled with others. Industrialization, which began about 250 years ago, is what made the nation-state powerful. Before that it wasn’t very strong, but the forces of industrialization—the need to regulate and so on—brought about the modern nation-state with its intrusiveness. Globalization is a force akin to that of industrialization 200 years ago, but it’s operating in the opposite direction. It’s eroding national boundaries. It’s breaking down the nation-state. And what we’re seeing now, I think, is the Westphalian system and this globalization in uneasy relationship with each other, with the nation-state system gradually losing its cohesiveness and globalization still a force, having an impact but not controlling things.

Globalization also tends, I think, to lead to the breakup of states into ever smaller and more homogenous political units with people who think alike. One of the best examples of that is Yugoslavia. It was set up, really by Woodrow Wilson, after World War I, and it was a small state in Europe. The same territory is now seven micro states, and each one of those is less able than a nation like the United States—or even a normal-size state—to deal with these forces of globalization that keep washing over national borders.

So this is the kind of world that we live in, and we need to try to figure out how to deal with these new forces in a world which is still governed by the old forces. That’s not an easy problem. The president and everyone involved have to deal with issues using institutions that were designed for an earlier age.

The financial crisis is a good demonstration of what I’m talking about. It has shown us that there is a single economic world structure. What happens economically in one place immediately travels around and affects everybody else. We do not have a political structure to deal with a single economic structure. We faced this first with the Breton Woods Treaties, but they were put together in 1944 for a world and problems which have long since passed. We then tried the G8; it’s not working. Now the G20 says, “We are the ones who are going to handle it.” We’re trying to come to grips with the world, but the institutions that we have are intended to deal with a world that is long gone.

This is true almost everywhere you look. Our own institutions of national security were set up in 1947 at the outset of the Cold War. The Defense Department is now a cohesive entity, and previous secretaries have built it into a great military machine, but one that was basically designed to affect World War II. Are we going to fight a World War II again? Secretary Gates, for example, recently said to his military leaders that we
have to begin to prepare for the wars we’re likely to have to fight, not the ones we would like to fight. The military is struggling with that right now. Our intelligence community was put together in 1947, designed to understand the Soviet Union—a single target—and they did a good job. They focused on that single target, and now that target is gone—and instead of a single one, there are hundreds of them. The institution is having trouble setting its priorities, finding areas that are threats—or not—and frequently we don’t even know threats exist until something pops up. So it’s an entirely different world. At the international level NATO is a marvelous military alliance, but what is it for? The original reason for NATO is virtually nonexistent. Is there some way we can take this wonderful military alliance and use it for problems in the 21st century? We’re in Afghanistan right now (I’ll touch on that a little later), but is NATO going to succeed or fail, continue to exist, or disappear because of Afghanistan? That’s not a product of our rational thinking. The last example, of course, is the United Nations. If you look at this globalized world, you’d think that international organization is the way we’ve got to go. And yet the UN, again, was built for the world in 1945, and it doesn’t function very well now. But if we didn’t have it, I would suggest that right now we couldn’t build a UN with the world in the state that it’s in. One of the most dramatic illustrations of the problem facing the UN is a contradiction it faces concerning Article II, which says, “Nothing in this charter shall give this institution [the UN] the right to intervene in matters essentially within the jurisdiction of its members.” In other words, stay out of the internal affairs of states. And yet the Security Council has passed several resolutions about the responsibility to protect, saying that when a state cannot or does not protect major elements of its population, it is the duty of the United Nations to intervene. Now, those two positions are in direct conflict, and we see it every day in Sudan. Sudan says, “We don’t want you in here.” And the UN is paralyzed with some members saying, “Yes, it’s our duty to intervene,” and others saying, “No, Sudan doesn’t want us there, and the UN charter says we can’t go there.” These are the things that surround the president as he deals with the specific problems that face him. I can’t remember a time when a president has faced such a multiplicity of serious and very, very difficult and complicated problems as our current president does. And he faces them with instruments and in an environment which complicates them all because it is a new environment. It’s not one that we’re used to, one that we read in our history books; it is a rapidly changing environment. I’m going to turn now to President Obama’s third task, dealing with specific situations. I will focus on just a few of the specific problems facing the president. If I don’t hit your favorite crisis, I apologize. What I’d like to talk about fundamentally is what I would call the arc of instability that goes from the Balkans into the Middle East into Central Asia and around up to the
Korean Peninsula. For most of that territory, it’s interesting that it is the area that used to be occupied by the last of the three great empires: in the Balkans, the Austro-Hungarian Empire; in the Middle East, the Ottoman Empire; and in Central Asia, the Russian Empire. In the wake of the collapse of those empires, these people are still trying to figure out who they are, where they belong, and how they want to be governed. It is thus an arc of great instability.

In a press conference this afternoon, they asked me essentially, “What’s the biggest crisis we face?” I said, “I’m not going to attempt to answer that.” But in terms of efficiency of response, I would point to the Palestinian peace process, because in the region that I just described, it could have a more sweeping effect on the future and on other problems in that difficult region than almost anything else I can think of. People say, “No, it shouldn’t be first. We’re in a war in Iraq, we’re in a war in Afghanistan, and Iran is facing us.” But here’s why: There is a historic sense of injustice that permeates the region. For example, it feeds radical organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas, who feed on the sense of injustice about what has happened to the Palestinian people. I think that if we could turn that around, we would liberate a lot of forces to deal with other problems we face—Iraq, for example. In the First Gulf War we had Arab armies fighting with us. In this war and its aftermath, the Arab world is nowhere to be seen. Why? Because it’s too dangerous now for Arab governments to be seen supporting the United States. Solving the Palestinian problem is fundamentally what needs to be done.

But why now? We’ve been trying to solve this problem for 50 years. I think a new effort is probably the only way to deal with it. The United States traditionally tries to get the Arabs and the Palestinians to just sit down together and to arrive at an agreement with whatever help we can provide them. I think that will not work now. Both sides are too weak and too dug in, and making compromises is very difficult. I think the United States needs to play a different role now.

The outlines of a Palestinian settlement have been fairly clear since the end of the Clinton administration with the Taba Accords, which were agreed to by both sides—but for a variety of reasons those accords collapsed. I think the United States should come out and say, “We advocate those accords, which are basically 1967 borders (with changes agreed to by both sides and only limited right of return yet to be agreed upon) with Jerusalem as the capital of both states and some kind of non-militarization of a Palestinian state.” Then the two sides can say, “Well, we didn’t want to make these compromises. We didn’t want to do this, but the United States did it.” It gives them some cover, and I think it would go a long way toward helping to deal with the issue of Iraq. It would put Iran (which feeds off this injustice and talks about it every day) back on the defensive and give the Obama administration a victory of historic proportions, providing momentum to deal with some of the other intractable problems.
Let me offer just a couple of words on Iraq. I think Iraq is going reasonably well now. The security situation is improving. The Iraqi army is gaining increased ability to deal with it. The political situation, however, is not making much progress—some, but not much. We can’t solve the Iraqis’ political problem for them; they have to do it themselves. But I think it makes a big difference whether they do it in the presence—in the cocoon, really—of the United States or if they do it on their own. If they do it while we’re still there, they’re likely to arrive at their compromises through a political process of debate and sharing the burdens and the rewards. If we have left, then they are more likely to arrive at their conclusion through the use of force than through discourse, and that is not a better solution for us. So while I think the drawdown has been okay so far, I would hope we would be careful to try to gauge the psychological presence of the United States—which has to be, in part, physical—with the progress that the Iraqis have made in solving some of their biggest problems. And there are some big ones.

There is still a Sunni-Shia problem. The Shias are still split in at least two different parts. But the biggest problem is with the Kurds in the northwest. That is the most intractable, both because the Kurds have their own army and because one of the prizes there is a lot of oil. There, I think, is where we need the incentive for them to make compromises while we’re still there. But overall I think things are going reasonably well.

Iran is a very difficult problem. The United States and Iran have had a very emotional relationship ever since the fall of the shah. The searing picture in American eyes is that of the members of the American Embassy being held hostage; and for the Iranians, the searing picture is that of us shooting down an Iranian airliner filled with passengers. That is the emotion that suffuses it all. It’s a problem where complications have been exacerbated by the recent Iranian elections and charges of fraud, by a splintering of the consensus in Iran about its governance, and by the latest revelations about nuclear enrichment plans.

We have two problems with Iran. One is Iran in its region. Iran borders both Iraq, in which we have troops, and Afghanistan, in which we have troops. So Iran is naturally a part of how we resolve those issues because Iran lives there and will be there forever. To try to solve problems with the neighbors while ignoring Iran is not likely to produce a stable result.

The second problem is Iran with nuclear weapons. I think there are two aspects. We don’t want Iran to have nuclear weapons, but Iran, because of its position and the region it is in, is a kind of a linchpin of another great surge of nuclear proliferation if they continue developing nuclear weapons. If they continue, you can be almost certain that Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and maybe others will feel they have to do the same thing for their own protection. That is not a world that we would like to see, with perhaps 30 or 40 new countries only a couple of months away from a nuclear weapon. So Iran is extremely important for us.
I think this administration has the right approach to Iran, and that is to be prepared to discuss all of the issues we face because Iran does live in a dangerous neighborhood. It’s a Shia-Muslim country in what is generally a Sunni-Muslim world. It is a Persian culture in what is generally an Arab world. How do we do it? I think the goal is to try to convince Iran that pursuing their course of an independent enrichment of uranium—one of the ways to a nuclear weapon—will not increase their security because of the consequences within the region. We do not object to them having nuclear power; indeed, we’re prepared to facilitate it. And the Russians and other nuclear powers are prepared to make enriched fuel available at costs below what Iran can produce on its own and take it away and store it or reprocess it at our own expense.

Will they agree? I don’t know. But I think it cannot happen without Russian support, and the Russians, I think, do not want Iran to have nuclear weapons. However, they have other things going with Iran that make them reluctant to antagonize Iran. If Russia, China, the United States, Germany, France, and Britain—who are the negotiating group—all agree, I think Iran will think twice before it stands up to everybody. It’s going to be very difficult now because the discovery of this second enrichment plant has made people angry, but I think if we can sit down and convince the Iranians that this is not the course of action they should take, we have a chance of succeeding. In any case, we lose very little by trying.

Afghanistan is perhaps the most complicated problem we face. We’ve gone through several stages in our hostilities inside Afghanistan, and several different strategies—or lack of strategies—as we have been involved there. We are now facing a conference of our leaders with a strategy that has been outlined by the new military leadership in Afghanistan to deal with the problem. We’ve had mixed notions about Afghanistan. Are we fighting a counterterrorism war or are we fighting a guerrilla war? They are different. If you’re fighting terrorists, then if you find a terrorist, you go after him. If you kill a number of civilians, it’s too bad, but it’s collateral damage. If you’re fighting a counterinsurgency war—that is, a war of hearts and minds—then in the same circumstances you don’t go after the bad guy, because you do more damage to what you’re trying to accomplish by killing the civilians than any good you do by capturing the bad guy. We have to resolve that within our military. Afghanistan is also next door to and conjoined at the hip with Pakistan—and Pakistan is a very troubled state. It is a complicated state; it has more than 100 nuclear weapons, and it is right next door to India, with whom it has a historically hostile relationship. This is a very volatile region, and there are no easy answers. The specter of Vietnam surrounds the discussion of whether we should send more troops. It is a very, very difficult problem.

I think the most successful foreign policy the United States has had over the last 35 years or so has been with China. Every president since Richard Nixon—Democrat
or Republican, some of them coming into office with very, very strong views about China—has come to the same conclusion: broadening and deepening our relationship with China is in the best interest of the United States and the world. And we’ve been consistent about it and have produced a relationship which 30 years ago was only a dream. However, it is still a difficult relationship. We and the Chinese have very different views about a lot of things. We have very different histories and traditions. But it’s not clear that we are fated to be antagonists. I think the Obama administration has made a good start with China. Unfortunately, several of our previous administrations have started out under pretty difficult circumstances—Tiananmen Square, which happened six months after the first President Bush was in office, and the shooting down of the P3, which happened a couple of months after George W. Bush was in office—but I think things now look fundamentally favorable.

As for the Russians, we have not had a felicitous relationship since the end of the Cold War. President George H. W. Bush tried hard to say that nobody lost the Cold War; we all won the Cold War by its end. We tried to welcome the new Russia into the ranks of democracies, but it was a difficult period. We took a number of steps which we thought were in the interest of building a Europe whole and free, but the Russians saw us as taking advantage of their weakness. We also overlooked the sense of humiliation that the average Russian had to feel at the end of the Cold War when they went from superpower status to nothingness in military, political, and economic matters. When you hear Putin rant and rave, he is expressing the frustration the Russians feel, I think, that when they were down, we walked all over them. We pushed the borders of NATO right up to the borders of Russia; we denounced the ABM Treaty. We did these things because we could, and they were powerless.

Now they’ve recovered their strength, and they’re not going to put up with it anymore. That’s the Putin line. Putin is an extreme kind of person, but I think that resonates in Russia, and it’s a psychology that we can do a lot about. We can do it through the realm of arms control, for example, because the one place the Russians are still a superpower is in their nuclear weapons. We and the Russians have 95 percent of the world’s nuclear weapons. So we can take them seriously and negotiate with them, asking, “What can we do in a world of nuclear weapons to construct a posture between us that will do the best we can to ensure nuclear weapons are never used? How can we cooperate on nuclear proliferation? How can we cooperate together to provide nuclear power to a world hungry for electricity?” It will be a long, slow struggle, but given the key role that the Russians play—for example, in Iran and perhaps even in Afghanistan and in the whole terrorism problem—it certainly is worth trying.

Let me say just one word about North Korea. North Korea is another of those vexing problems. In 15 years they have gone from withdrawing from the Non-Proliferation Treaty to having enough material for several
nuclear weapons to a semi-successful nuclear explosion. That’s fairly dramatic. They have now said the Six-Party Talks are over, and it’s not clear which way to go. It seems to me that we and the Chinese need to work very closely together and that the possibility still exists that if we see eye to eye on what the future of the Korean Peninsula is—and I see no reason why we have to differ—the two of us can succeed in turning North Korea back toward denuclearization. It won’t be easy. It will take some concessions on the part of the United States down the line, but it’s difficult to see how North Korea can survive without Chinese support.

I’ve only touched the surface of a lot of the problems we have in this world, and I guess my basic message is that we need to help our president now. He has an overwhelming situation facing him; each one of these problems that I’ve described could capture the complete attention of a government by itself. He’s got to deal with all of them, and we haven’t even talked about the domestic agenda. There are huge problems facing us, but what I’m saying is that, with the mood that the president has established and the receptiveness of that mood by the rest of the world, these problems are all solvable—difficult, but solvable. And if we can continue to execute the vision that our president has, I think we can make the 21st century the best that the miserable history of mankind has seen yet.
Islam and Western Peacemaking: Partnerships for a Better World

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