

MORE FECK, LESS HOC

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With the China situation still bubbling and troubling, it's time to ask -- once again -- just what is America's foreign policy? Team Bush doesn't talk much about its grand global plan, but that doesn't mean there isn't one, stated or unstated. In fact, there are some pretty good roots for such an overview among the Bush players. Let us speculate.

Recall that the epithet critics most often applied to the foreign policy of President Clinton was "feckless." In second place was "ad hoc." Bush's goal is a foreign policy with more feck and less hoc.

This is no easy job. The Clinton foreign policy wasn't bad -- sometimes successful, not often too harmful. However, it was apparently directionless.

In fairness, direction is hard to come by when the compass disappears. For 50 years, from 1939 to 1989, American foreign policy had its direction thrust upon it: Lead the democratic forces, win World War II, win the Cold War. We did it. Those victories may well have paved the way for the remarkably successful decade of the 1990s. The best may be yet to come, an ascent toward what Winston Churchill called "the broad sunlit uplands." And today, America is "No. 1" and the world's "sole surviving superpower."

But superpower-dom is a condition, not a policy. A policy accommodates a condition and offers guidance about what to do next, on big items, on small items, and on unexpected items that go bump in the night, as happened with China near Hainan Island.

So what might be the basis of an American foreign policy? What's our compass heading?

Consider a classified and controversial draft of a Department of Defense document issued, or almost issued, back in 1992, during the first Bush administration. The DOD paper, the first post-Cold War edition of the bi-annual "Defense Planning Guidance," ginned up a political firestorm against so-called "hard-liners."

Its principal authors were Paul Wolfowitz, then the undersecretary for policy at the Department of Defense, and his deputy, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, alleged hard-liners both. Wolfowitz, a key foreign policy adviser to Gov. Bush during the 2000 campaign, is now deputy secretary of defense, No. 2 to Secretary Don Rumsfeld. Libby is now chief of staff for Vice President Cheney.

But hard-line doesn't mean wrong line. The DPG document, as it was originally written in 1992, was never published. It was leaked to The New York Times by "an official who believes this post-cold-war strategy debate should be carried out in the public domain." Who? Just call him Mr. Softie.

But even the Times' wildly spun description of the Wolfowitz-Libby DPG draft made some solid sense. It reported, breathlessly: "The classified document makes the case for a world dominated by one superpower. ... America's political and military mission in the post-cold-war era will be to ensure that no rival superpower is allowed to emerge. ... With its focus on this concept of benevolent domination by one power, the Pentagon document articulates the clearest rejection to date of collective internationalism."

Wolfowitz and Libby noted that the document was far more moderate than its description, and specifically that its core

was to guard against the emergence of hostile regional superpowers, for example, Iraq or China. Such regional vigilance, they believed, would prevent the rise of a hostile global superpower.

That still makes sense and offers a guideline, a policy, if you will. In the briefest of strokes, consider the overview this way: "America is No. 1. We stand for something decent and important. That's good for us and good for the world. That's the way we want to keep it."

Comes now the 24 Americans held on Hainan Island. Another nation -- that did not believe its power was globally benevolent, that did not believe it was important to stay in first place, that did not believe it had to be a regional guarantor of stability -- might well accede to Chinese demands for an abject apology (rather than offer only regrets). This might get the detained American crew back with greater speed. And if such behavior were then to be called feckless ad hoc-racy, who in the larger world would really care?

But for America, more than for any other nation, credibility and honor count. China pretty well fits the mold of one of those potentially hostile regional superpowers originally described by Wolfowitz-Libby. If America grovels, the sound of the scratching will be heard in Japan, with whom we have a self-defense treaty, and in Taiwan, with whom we have less formal commitments. It would echo, corrosively, in every region where American power serves as an earnest for democratic values and military stability.

That is just what the 1992 "Defense Planning Guide" warned against.

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