

2015

NOV

03

“Pulling Back: What Happens When America Rethinks Its International Role?”

Issue/Region :
/America



On Tuesday, November 3, the Asan Institute for Policy Studies held a roundtable with Ambassador Stephen Sestanovich, the George F. Kennan senior fellow for Russian and Eurasian studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom David Professor of International Diplomacy at Columbia University. In a talk titled “Pulling Back: What Happens When America Rethinks Its International Role?” Amb. Sestanovich discussed key themes in his recent book on American foreign policy, *Maximalist: America in the World from Truman to Obama*.

Sestanovich categorizes two key phases in a cyclical pattern characterizing U.S. foreign policy: maximalism and retrenchment. As he explains, periods of intense international exertion by the United States have always been followed by retrenchment since World War II. After the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and the Bush administration's campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, defense budgets were cut, global commitments questioned, and domestic priorities re-asserted. Yet, just as regularly, the search for a downsized, "sustainable" foreign policy itself comes under challenge. With the Obama presidency, the U.S. is currently in the retrenchment phase. The cyclical nature that Sestanovich identifies "may be obvious, but it is not the common view. We tend to overemphasize continuity in American foreign policy, and it has even been perceived as its virtue."

Maximalist phases are generally responding to an immediate crisis. Sestanovich identifies four basic precepts of maximalism: 1) U.S. unilateralism where other countries do not contribute very much, 2) inadequate international mechanisms, 3) the need to resolve issues fully as halfway measures do not hold, and 4) the short attention span of American public opinion.

In contrast, Sestanovich describes retrenchment phases as those coming after maximalist phases during the "sobering up period." Key characteristics of retrenchment phases include isolationist factions, repeated emphasis on "sustainable" and "long-haul" foreign policies, strong decision makers, a move away from ideology in policy decisions, and new directions in creating stable relationships with adversaries. Retrenchment presidents are initially popular and usually get re-elected, but end up encountering criticism for long-term policy decisions in their second term. Moreover, retrenchment presidents lose control of the debate as they are "unable to explain their foreign policy in an inspiring way," resulting in frustration. Sestanovich also points out that "retrenchment phases end in crises, but not all crises end with retrenchment."

What are the implications for America's East Asian allies and adversaries? Sestanovich expresses that "there is a chance for a new administration with a more activist outlook." This activism will be reflected by deeper American commitment in regions like Europe and the Middle East, with East Asia not requiring an immediate reinsertion of American power. It is also possible that the next administration will "not turn fully away from retrenchment" and strategize more selective policies with "continued pressure to keep the defense budget where it is." It is still unclear what the dominant theme or ideologies of the next administration's policy will be. He recommends that American allies should listen to the U.S. debates to better understand the possible policy trends and highlights

that “crucial time will be the first year of the next administration where its strategic direction will be set.”

In conclusion, Sestanovich shared his views on what he believes may be the “future of the American bloc” where traditional American alliances will be the basis for America’s international activist role and policies. Ultimately, unilateralism cannot be sustained, and America will need to work with allies towards shared goals.

Date/Time: Tuesday, November 4, 2015 / 3:00pm – 5:00pm

Place: Conference Room (2F), The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Written by: Rachel Leng

⇒ **Stephen Sestanovich** is the George F. Kennan senior fellow for Russian and Eurasian studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis professor of international diplomacy at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs. He is the author of *Maximalist: America in the World from Truman to Obama*, published by Knopf in February 2014.

From 1997 to 2001, Sestanovich was the U.S. State Department’s ambassador-at-large for the former Soviet Union. He has also served as vice president for Russian and Eurasian affairs at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, director of Soviet and East European studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and senior director for policy development at the National Security Council.