

We Must Put the "Crises of the Moment" in Context.
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Critics of President Obama have an easy job. They do not have to make the decisions that will impact long-term American wellbeing. That is his job, and like making sausage, it is not a pretty process. It involves heavy lifting and complex issues.

Two principles have governed American foreign policy for the past two centuries: first, make certain that no one power controls all of Europe or all of Asia. We would be standing alone if such a powerful enemy controlled all other countries and natural resources. Imagine our fate if the Nazis had conquered and held Europe from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast of Russia.

The second principle is one that began in the late 19th century: a world with global trade, an international economic system, and at least tacit agreement on the rules governing civilized countries. Although such a world actually existed, it did not save Europe from descent into World War I. Wilson believed that the international system was not enough without the clout of a league of nations which would sustain peaceful rule of law.

Unfortunately, this too did not work because there was no leadership; America opted for isolationism instead. World War II took up where World War I ended. International law was unenforceable. It took the US and its allies to defeat two powerful and ruthless outlaw states, Nazi Germany and Fascist Japan.

Once more, a new league of nations was formed, this time led by the US. But it was soon apparent that United Nations laws were unenforceable and nation-states, most of which were dictatorships, would not defend liberal rule of law. Liberal democracies were in a minority, but with the leadership of the United States, they prevailed over the advocates of Communism.

Today the world is facing what David Brooks calls "The Revolt of the Weak against the rules of civilization." We cannot let ourselves panic over the resurgence of primitive Islam in ISIS, which decapitates captives, ethnically cleanses captured territory, and rapes and sells women into slavery. They move quickly, just as the Nazis did in their blitzkrieg campaigns, but it is one thing to take territory and another to hold it. A wise President will not have to wait long before this scruffy terror group actually has a return address (they think they can run a modern state). Geography will kick in with a punishment for their boldness. Hitler learned that too late.

President Putin of Russia is much admired by some of our senators for his "ability to act decisively," in contrast to our president who is weighing the best responses to this attack on global rule of law. Putin is reckless, and like Hitler and ISIS, is resorting on speed to take what he wants before anybody can react. Again, it is one thing to take and another to hold. Mr. Putin represents weakness, weakness of a country that lost the Cold War, lost its empire and its ability to cow its neighbors, and has one of the lowest birthrates in the world, a symptom of its economic and moral bankruptcy. When a country makes and sells nothing that anybody wants except for its oil and gas, it does not have much of a future.

For a long-term foreign policy to meet today's needs, we need a president who can see when intervening is in our long-term national interest and when it is not. All irritants in such places as Syria, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Russia, individually do not affect the larger interests of the United States. But if taken together, and they do, we can focus on the Black Sea as a whole region with consequences.

Around that sea are Ukraine (under siege by Russia); Russia opposing us in support of Syria's dictatorship and Iran's nuclear aspirations; Turkey, which as it Islamizes is increasingly undependable; and Europe which depends on Russian and Middle East oil and gas. All such issues are tied in to the Black Sea, a place that must be our focus. This is like triple deck chess.

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