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Transcript

The Changing Role of the US in the World

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Steven Erlanger:

Hello ladies and gentlemen, I'm Steve Erlanger, I've just come back to London after 25 years as the *New York Times* bureau chief here. It's a great pleasure to be here and to see you, and for me it's a great excuse, because this way I don't have to go to a thanksgiving lunch. But for all those of you with an American connection, like Xenia and Gillian, who's about to go back, I wish you all a happy thanksgiving. We have a good topic ahead of us, which is this, the idea that the role of the United States is shifting, its perception is shifting. I think to some degree the problem is the brand of the United States is slipping in the world, and what I hope to do today with all of you is to explore the ways in which US policy appears to be shifting or buffeted or changing. And to do that I think we have a really good panel, and what I'm hoping to do is have them talk a bit, ask them some questions then open up to you for your questions. So without going much farther, I think we'll start with Gillian Tett, I think everyone knows Gillian, a stalwart at the *Financial Times*, a seer about the bubble and a must read I think for those of us who care about economics/politics. Gillian, go ahead.

Gillian Tett:

Well thank you very much indeed. And I'm just going to lay out a few comments I hope to spark some debate because, although I do spend much of my time looking at economic and financial issues, I was recently in Aspen at a small gathering organized by Charlie Rose, the US television chat show guru, if you like, with a veritable who's who of the American foreign policy and military establishment. I mean everybody from Colin Powell, Donlon, Gates, Alexander, Petraeus, John McCain, you name it, they were there in the room, very small group. And we started off discussing the issue of revolutions and when is it right to intervene or not intervene in support of revolutions if you are America. The issue that sparked that was obviously the recent events in Syria, but what surprized me was the level of passion and, to be frank, division that quickly erupted in the room.

Essentially a large number of the people there were arguing that actually the problem about revolutions is that they tend to end rather messily. In fact one of them suggested the only revolution that had not ended very messily in the last few decades was the American revolution, displaying wonderful American self-confidence, and were essentially arguing that it would be great folly to spend too much time getting involved in Syria because at the end of the day, America would end up being not just wasting resources, but essentially being

humiliated on the world stage. The flipside to that were several voices who were arguing that it was imperative for America to get involved in supporting the right side in revolutions like the Syrian revolution, because if it didn't, it would quickly lose whatever moral authority it had and its standing and status on the global stage would be significantly undermined.

Now, such arguments in the very heart of the American leadership are not of course new. If you go back to the days of the Founding Fathers in America, there was an equally bitter fight about whether or not America should get involved with the French Revolution, and in many ways the kind of language that's being bandied around today in relation to Syria or elsewhere is uncannily similar. But what's fascinating is the degree to which you have an overlay between, or even, if you like, a triple perfect storm of three factors that are combining to makes these debates very, very highly charged. Because the question of America's standing in the world and its status, and how it should or should not deal with potential new competitors like China, is coming at a moment of tremendous fiscal pressure and also a tremendously bitter and deep intellectual and ideological debate about what the role of government could or should be right now. The question of just how free market, just how big a government America wants, is something which is very much bubbling through the political current, and the fact that those three elements are intersecting right now is one reason why the discussions are so bitter, so deep, and for the moment so hard to resolve.

One of the people who was in the room that day said, effectively summing up the fundamental problem, the biggest single security threat to America today comes not from Iran, not from anywhere else, but from two square miles around Washington, and that essentially is the big challenge that the American establishment are still grappling with and will be dealing with for a long time. So I say that as an overview to Xenia, who's going to talk to us about what that means in practice.

Xenia Dormandy:

I feel like I've been thrown a fiery ball that I now have to deal with, but let me indeed pick up some of the points Gillian's just made. The question to me is intent versus reality; what's actually happening and what's the intent, to the extent that you can kind of call it a unitary intent on the part of the US government, which I think might be going a little far, but we're going to simplify a little bit here. The question that I kind of keep coming back to is America has for decades been talking about the fact that it does not want to

be the world's policeman, but I think most people would agree that rhetoric and action haven't followed one another. It's said it doesn't want to be the world's policeman, and then it's gone and been the world's policeman, and it seems to be actually pretty happy with being the world's policeman.

The question is, is that still the case? And I would argue that no, it isn't still the case, for the first time perhaps, America's actions are following its rhetoric. Now we can debate, and I'm sure we will debate, whether that's planned, whether there is a policy to do that, whether it's well thought out, whether there's a big strategy. It's a good question, but the reality is that America's actions are following its rhetoric, it does not want to be the world's policeman, it doesn't say it wants to be the world's policeman and it isn't, and why? And this is really picking up many of the same points that Gillian said. Essentially there's both domestic reasons for this and there's international reasons.

On the international sense, the kind of broader framework, the broader context is well the challenges we face today are not ones that can be dealt with unilaterally or bilaterally. So if you go back, many of the challenges, they were cross-border challenges, they were between A and B, they covered a region, today's challenges - list the top five challenges that the world faces today and they're environment, they're energy, they're pandemics, they're food and water security. These things do not have borders. America can't charge out and say this is what we want to do and we're going to do it, it would have absolutely, well maybe not no impact but it'll have very, very little impact. So the first reason why is this happening is because the challenges we face do not lend themselves to a unilateral American response.

Then there's a couple of domestic reasons, and this I won't elaborate on, because Gillian kind of laid them out. There's the fact that people on both sides of the aisle are now talking about this. This is not a Democratic or Republican thing, this is pervasive. You look at polls within the United States, there was a *New York Times* CBS News poll conducted in September of this year that found that 62 per cent of respondents, American respondents, felt that the US should not take the leading role among all other countries in the world in trying to solve the international conflicts. That was true across the Democrats, Republicans, 62 per cent. More than half polled by Gallup proposed military action in Syria opposed it, less didn't. So the public perception is saying we don't want to do this any more. The elite leaders are saying we don't want to do this any more.

Things like the energy revolution that's taken place over the last couple of years, it actually shouldn't affect foreign policy in any significant way. America's still going to need to be engaged in the Middle East, and yet the perception is that it does. The perception is for many Americans that they no longer need to be engaged in the Middle East as they once were. And then, of course, there's the resource factor, the fact that America, like so many other countries in the West, can no longer live by the social contract that we've had for the last 60 years. We just don't have the resources, something has to give, and so the question is, is it international? Is it domestic? Almost certainly international.

What does this mean? And this is where I will close, just to kind of put something out on the table. Hillary Clinton was here about six weeks ago now, and she put out a concept of networked leadership. A network leadership to her meant that it was an America that was more multilateral, and an America that not only engaged with state actors but non-state actors. The example she gave was if you want to do something about cyber security, that is not something that the state can do alone, the state has to work with the corporate sector to do it. Now whether that - and this gets back to where I started - whether that's an intentional policy of the Obama administration I do not know, I can't answer that question, but I can certainly say that that's kind of the reality and that's where we're going.

The world's problems are going to be dealt with by state and non-state players, she's right about cyber security, she's right about energy, she's right about the environment, pandemics, and it's going to be – the way that the state is used and the way that this administration, the Obama administration, and I believe the one that takes over from it, be it Republican or Democrat, will move to use much more soft power, much more diplomacy and economic power rather than necessarily military power. The way they use military power is changing. It's no longer mass, it's much more targeted and, again, I would say this is not an Obama phenomena. The question I have is if that is true of the United States, what is the international response? Is Europe going to step up and fill the vacuum that is a less active America, or an America that acts in a very different way, or not? Is China going to? Or do we have a vacuum, do we just have to deal with that fact?

Steven Erlanger:

I think that's quite a good start, and I'm going to posit another notion, which I might ask both of you to comment on as you like, which is the notion that the

United States is a revolutionary power becomes a joke to me. We are a status quo power. We all live by myths, we have our myths, the British have myths, certainly the French have their myths too, and one of the great American myths is that we had anything more than a bourgeois revolution, which we didn't. I mean this was not St Petersburg. And I think the United States' role in the world, however reluctant, is inevitable.

You just look at Iran, I mean we think Iran, that should be by definition a multilateral deal, it was the EU3+3, it was the P5+1, it was the whole security council plus Germany. Cathy Ashton was the chairman, but how did it work, it worked through a private back channel between Bill Burns and the Iranians. And Kerry then sat there and negotiated a deal, the rest of the foreign ministers came rushing to Geneva, slightly embarrassed being left out, there were adjustments made to be sure, and some good adjustments, in my view, by the French, but the fact of the matter is it would not have happened without the Americans, that the American-Iranian relationship was crucial to that. I think we see it in Libya too. I mean Gadaffi would have won, it seems to me, without NATO's intervention. The French were very much against NATO being used, but they couldn't have handled it themselves. In Mali the French acted on their own but they couldn't have done what they did without significant support from the United States in terms of transport planes and particularly refuelling, capacity, they got some help from the Germans and the British too.

So it is a reluctant policeman, that is for sure, and the polls indicate it doesn't much want to be, but look at Syria. I mean everyone's looking to whom for a resolution of Syria? The United States is going no thank you, but the killing goes on, and why? Because Washington has chosen not to engage. Now we'll see how long that choice lasts. So you see the economy turning around, you see fracking helping with energy, but you also see - and this is the other side of it, which I also want you to deal with, which is Afghanistan, American-led seems to be failing. Libya is nothing to be terribly proud of. Syria we look frozen and indecisive while killing goes on to great degree. Our allies in Asia are saying pivot, what pivot? So then you have [Edward] Snowdon, you have the NSA problem, you have PRISM, you have deep troubles of trust with some of our best allies, and you have to ask yourself where in this ambivalent picture is the American brand, is the American model? I mean can you look to it for leadership if it doesn't want to lead? Is it enough to be the *de facto* power, and is that going to make the Western world's challenge from the East easier or harder? So I'm just curious whether any of those questions strike you, Gillian, or Xenia, and then we'll go out to you guys.

Gillian Tett:

Well there's lots of questions. I'd also make a few points. Before I became a journalist, I was an anthropologist, and one of the things you learn as a cultural or social anthropologist is that every society has some form of founding myth which keeps it together, some form of shared rhetoric or cognitive map on the part of the elite. But those cognitive maps, those myths, are always riddled with hypocrisy in the sense that the myth never matches the reality. And the question of revolution and the export of democracy cuts to the very heart of that tension in America, which is one reason why this discussion about the Syrian revolution was so fascinating in terms of the tangible foreign policy implications.

What I find fascinating, looking from a cultural perspective, from an anthropological perspective at the foreign policy debate, is the degree of tension that's currently developing in terms of how Americans themselves talk about the foreign policy issues. Because I would agree in many ways that when someone like Hillary Clinton talks about foreign policy today and her staff, she does use a lot of language like network foreign policy, she does talk about soft power. I mean, frankly, after half an hour of talking to some of the Clintonites, you come away with the impression that they've swallowed the Davos bible wholeheartedly with all this jargon to do with networks. I mean it's quite irritating stuff to be honest, but sort of networks and coordination and problem solving, etc, etc. But that's all very well for that group in Washington. The reality is that when Americans in general talk about foreign policy issues, they tend to sound like something out of a Hollywood movie. It's very black or white. You're either in the game or you're out of the game. You're either taking part and trying to save the world or you're simply putting up the fortress immediately. And that kind of binary discussion and that binary language in some ways worked quite well in the Cold War era, it doesn't work very well today.

So one of the biggest challenges of all I think for the leadership, or the foreign policy establishment, is not simply the fact that they're having resources constrained, and not simply the fact that they are essentially watching new competitors arise in the world stage, it's also because it's simply not clear how anybody in American government today can communicate effectively with their own population about what they're trying to do on the foreign policy stage. I mean revolution is just part of the challenge, and in many ways a smaller part.

Xenia Dormandy:

So yes, you put a whole load of questions on the table.

Steven Erlanger:

I'm sorry about that.

Xenia Dormandy:

Yes, no, thank you, as always. Let me perhaps make kind of two or three points. The first is what you've just laid out, that is historical shadow, if you will. Everybody is used to looking to America to respond, and so everybody continues to look to America to respond. So the question to me isn't what America has done and, therefore, what other people look to, the question to me is what America is going to do and, therefore, what should be the response to that. So that would be the first point. The second point I would make is I will meet your anthropology with psychology.

Steven Erlanger:

Can sociology be far behind?

Xenia Dormandy:

Yes, exactly, if we get into philosophy I'm in a lot of trouble. So I did my undergrad in psychology, which I should probably not admit in public, but it is a phenomena that people dislike change, generally speaking. Huge generalizations I'm making here but people dislike change, we're not comfortable with it. We like to know where we are, we like to put things in boxes, and then we kind of work within that construct. Change is really, really hard, and so if - big question; if America is changing, that is going to be very, very painful, not just for the United States but for everybody else. If America is changing and isn't able to express what it is changing from and to in particular, and I would argue that this administration, if I can fault this administration on one thing - I can probably fault it on more but if I'm going to focus on one thing it's that it hasn't explained what it wants to go to, it hasn't explained what it wants to be, and so the rest of the world is kind of left going I just don't, you know.

Libya, you did something, Mali you kind of did only when we pushed you, actually Libya too, Syria you're not doing anything, we don't know what to expect, we don't know what to anticipate. So the second point I'd make is change is really, really hard, do not expect that this is going to be comfortable. It isn't, it's not going to be for the United States, as you've got this kind of cacophony of ideas about what America should be, it's not going to be for the rest of the world either. And that is playing into this kind of sense of brand and is the brand losing its shine because we don't actually know what the brand represents any more.

But I want to take us back to where to me the really important question comes. If you buy the idea that America's role in the world, America sees its role in the world as changing, and that America wants its role in the world to change, and that America is going to be two things, it's going to be less active and it's going to act in different ways, so it's going to be less kind of all big military, which I think most countries would like to see, no more Iraqs and Afghanistans, it's going to be targeted, it's going to be small, it's going to use other instruments, it's going to use economic, etc, etc. If you buy those things, what then are the repercussions, what's the scenario look like?

I'll give you options. Option one is America does that for a decade, goes oh dear, this is not good, and starts engaging again. America does that for a decade and everybody else starts to think differently about what America's role is, so the expectation that America needs to lead isn't always the case and you get more Libyas, where France and the UK said you know what, something needs to be done, we're going to pull America in behind us rather than expect America to lead. That's the second scenario. The third scenario is that you get this vacuum and that not the West fills the vacuum but the emerging markets fill the vacuum. You've got China, you've got India, you've got Indonesia, you've got Turkey, possibly Saudi Arabia, but certainly South Africa, etc, etc. So you have others fill the vacuum, some of whom we agree with, some of whom we don't agree with. And the fourth is you just get a vacuum, you have these ungoverned spaces but they're big and they look different.

Steven Erlanger:

Right. I think that's a very good place right now, because we have enormous challenges in the Middle East where alliances are collapsing. We have a sectarian war, the possibility of a new terrorist haven, in a Syria which is gone, the Syria as we knew it is over with. There'll be something else, but

there will not be, I think for a long time to come, any unitary Syria. And of course in China, I mean something will depend on how China, as Bill Clinton said over and over and over again, chooses to define its destiny, and I'm still not sure we know the answer to that.