

# International Engagement— Why We Need to Stay the Course

Congressman Ike Skelton

A DECADE AGO, events took place in Europe and the Soviet Union which, for the United States, were the beginning of the end of a long struggle—a struggle that was characterized by terrible sacrifices in Korea and Vietnam; by periods of great national confidence and occasional episodes of uncertainty; by debates in the halls of Congress that were sometimes historic and solemn and sometimes partisan and shrill; and, above all, by a widely shared sense of national purpose that endured despite occasionally bitter internal divisions.

The constancy with which the United States carried out its global responsibilities over the long course of the Cold War is a great testimony to the character of the American people and to the quality of the leaders who guided the nation through often trying times. In spite of the costs, in the face of great uncertainties and despite grave distractions, our nation showed the ability to persevere. In doing so, we answered the great question about America that Winston Churchill once famously posed—“Will you stay the course?”\* The answer is, we did.

Today, we need to raise a similar question once again, but this time for ourselves and in a somewhat

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different form. Today the key question is perhaps more challenging, because it is more open-ended. It is, “Will we stay engaged?”

*Engagement*, while not yet widely embraced as a characterization of our basic global posture, seems to me to express quite well what we need to be about today—that we need to be engaged *in* the world, and that we need to be engaged *with* other nations in building and maintaining a stable international security system.

Engagement will not be easy to sustain. Indeed, as has become clear in recent years, it will be as challenging to the United States to remain fully engaged today as it was to stay the course during the Cold War for the following reasons:

\* Winston Churchill, as quoted in Stewart Alsop, *Stay of Execution: A Sort of Memoir* by Stewart Alsop, Philadelphia, PA, 1973.



US and South Korean soldiers scan North Korean territory from Check Point 3 in the Pan Mun Jom Joint Security Area.

US Army

***Engagement is difficult because it is financially expensive. In recent years, it has been difficult to find the resources to meet obvious needs in defense and foreign affairs because of pressures to reduce the budget deficit. Now that the deficit has been brought under control, a part of the discussion of budget priorities ought to be how to restore a reasonable level of investment in meeting our international security requirements.***

- We face challenges to our security that in some ways are more daunting than those we faced during the Cold War.
- It will often be difficult to reach domestic agreement on foreign affairs because legitimate, deeply held values will often be hard to reconcile.
- We will have to risk grave dangers and pay a price to carry out our responsibilities, and because of the costs, it will sometimes be tempting to think that we would be more secure if we were more insulated from turmoil abroad.
- We will have to struggle mightily not to allow domestic travails to divert us from the vigilance that we must consistently pursue.

But our political system, which encourages open debate and constantly challenges leaders to rise to the demands of the times, gives us the opportunity, if we are thoughtful and serious about our responsibilities, to see where our interests lie and to pur-

sue our values effectively. While engagement in the world may sometimes be difficult to sustain, it is nonetheless necessary. Moreover, it has succeeded in bolstering our security.

## Engagement is Difficult

Engagement is difficult, first of all, because it entails costs and carries risks. In an age of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons of mass destruction, the United States faces particularly grave dangers. To quail in the face of these risks would be far more damaging to our security than to confront them—but we should not underestimate the dangers we face. Engagement is also difficult because it requires us to make policy choices in which values we hold dear are troubling to reconcile. Constructive engagement with China, for example, requires that we reconcile our deeply held convictions about human rights abuses with our knowledge that a policy of isolating China would be self-defeating.

Engagement with longstanding allies may also be turbulent at times. Many, if not most, of our allies have not, for example, wholeheartedly supported our efforts to enforce sanctions on nations that we believe are guilty of sponsoring international terrorism or that we see as threats to global peace.

A related difficulty of engagement is what might be called the paradox of burden sharing—getting allies to do more often requires that we do more as well. We will sometimes become embroiled in undertakings overseas that, at face value, cost us more than our immediate interests appear to justify. The obvious example is Bosnia. The reason we must, nonetheless, be engaged, is that our overarching interest in building effective security cooperation with our allies requires that we exercise leadership.

Engagement is also difficult for domestic political reasons. To be blunt, no one gets elected by promising to devote a great deal of time and attention to foreign affairs. Those in positions of responsibility must make compromises, choose between alternatives that are often “bad” and “less bad,” take risks to get things done and bear the criticism if initiatives fail.

Finally, engagement is difficult because it is financially expensive. In recent years, it has been difficult to find the resources to meet obvious needs in defense and foreign affairs because of pressures to reduce the budget deficit. Now that the deficit has been brought under control, a part of the discussion of budget priorities ought to be how to restore a reasonable level of investment in meeting our international security requirements.

US Army



A 2d Battalion, 69th Armor Regiment from the 24th Infantry Division convoys to a refueling point during Operation Vigilant Warrior, October 1994.

***Engagement has also entailed a constant, rotational presence in the Persian Gulf—a commitment which, we now should recognize, is on a par with the commitments we have maintained in Europe and the Far East. It has involved military intervention in Haiti, an ongoing peacekeeping operation in Bosnia and literally dozens of smaller-scale military operations. One thing should be clear—as long as we are actively engaged abroad, the pace of military operations is likely to be much more demanding than anyone had imagined a few years ago.***

### Engagement is Necessary

Despite these difficulties, there is no alternative to continued, active US engagement in the world. We persevered in the Cold War precisely because we felt it was our responsibility as a nation to defend against tyranny. In the name of that moral mission, we may sometimes have asked too much of ourselves, and particularly of our young sons and daughters in the military—but it was nonetheless a goal worthy of the American people.

Now we have a very different moral responsibility before us that is equally important. Our responsibility now is to use our unchallenged position of global leadership in a fashion that will make the universal hope for peace, prosperity and freedom the norm of international behavior. If the United States were not to try, at least, to use its current position of strength to help construct an era of relative peace and stability, it would be a moral failure of historic magnitude. More than that, to fail to exercise our strength in a fashion that builds global cooperation would also, in the long run, leave us weaker and more vulnerable to dangers from abroad.

We need to be engaged because only the United States can provide the leadership necessary to respond to global and regional challenges to stabil-

ity, and only the United States can foster the growth of regional security structures that will prevent future challenges from arising. Likewise, we need to be engaged because our continued presence gives other nations confidence in our power and in our reliability and makes us the ally of choice if and when conflict arises. We also need to be engaged because only by actively shaping effective regional security systems can we create an environment in which nations that might otherwise challenge stability will instead perceive a community of interests with the United States and with our regional allies. Additionally, we need to be engaged because only by recognizing and responding to the security concerns of other nations can we expect them to support our security interests and concerns. Cooperation from other nations is essential to deter and defeat enemies who want to undermine global order.

Not everyone agrees on the necessity for engagement. Some traditional champions of a strong national defense argue that engagement puts too much emphasis on peacekeeping or humanitarian missions, which are costly and not directly related to the overriding responsibility of US military forces—to prepare for major conflicts.

For others, who believe the world ought to be more peaceful and less militarized since the Cold War's end, engagement seems to emphasize security matters at the expense of other interests, including human rights, fair trade practices and environmental protection. Some even see engagement as

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a questionable rationale for continued high military spending in a world with no direct, obvious threats.

Proponents of a strong national defense should reconsider their position in view of the compelling evidence that engagement is essential to our military security. Similarly, those who believe that conflicts can be prevented by promoting multilateral cooperation should understand that military engagement abroad is essential to build and enforce a more peaceful, cooperative world order in which our other interests and values can flourish.

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Effective international engagement requires much more active and extensive US military involvement abroad than many expected. In the Cold War's

wake, we decided to maintain a permanent military presence of about 100,000 troops in both Europe and Asia. These deployments, in retrospect, hardly appear excessive. On the contrary, our forces in Europe, if anything, have been badly overworked. They have been involved in countless joint exercises with old and new allies and with former enemies that have been critically important in building a new, cooperative security order in Europe.

Engagement has also entailed a constant, rotational presence in the Persian Gulf—a commitment which, we now should recognize, is on a par with the commitments we have maintained in Europe and the Far East. It has involved military intervention in Haiti, an ongoing peacekeeping operation in Bosnia and literally dozens of smaller-scale military operations. One thing should be clear—as long as we are actively engaged abroad, the pace of military operations is likely to be much more demanding than anyone had imagined a few years ago.

We in the Congress must keep this in mind when it comes to resourcing the military. Engagement costs money. This policy cannot be pursued cheaply. We need a strong, well-resourced military to execute this strategy.

## **Engagement has Succeeded**

Perhaps the most important thing we need to keep in mind is that the US policy of engagement has been a success. Yes, we have suffered some failures. No, we have not accomplished everything we might have hoped. Yes, we have made some mistakes. But failures, shortcomings and mistakes are inevitable in international affairs—there has never been a government in history that has not run into such difficulties.

Engagement is as centrally important to our security—and to the prospects for peace in the world—as containment was during the Cold War. Perhaps above all, the key issue is whether we will persist despite the fact that the struggle to maintain relative international peace will never be concluded. This is not a struggle we can see through to the end. It is, nonetheless, an effort that we as a nation must continue to make. **MR**

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