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# Diplomacy, Alliance Management, and Partisanship

A DISCUSSION WITH  
SECRETARY JAMES A. BAKER III

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**FLETCHER FORUM:** *As Secretary of State, one of your primary responsibilities was the maintenance of key alliances to balance shifting global trends and crises. In looking back on the last several years, and as the United States addresses a rising China and uncertain outcomes in the Middle East, how would you assess American alliance management from a policy standpoint? What advice do you have for the next administration?*

**BAKER:** I believe that our formal alliances—notably, with the NATO members, Japan, and South Korea—remain the bulwark of security in Europe and East Asia. Such traditional partnerships permit us to leverage our power in ways that promote regional stability. Informal alliances can also play an important and sometimes decisive part in advancing U.S. interests; the international coalition we assembled to eject Iraq from Kuwait in 1990-1991 is a signal case in point. Maintaining the strength of our alliances will be an important priority for the next administration, whoever is elected president. Going forward, we will need to be flexible in our management of existing alliances and imaginative in creating new

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**James A. Baker III** *was the sixty-first Secretary of State of the United States, serving from January 22, 1989 through August 23, 1992. He also served as White House Chief of Staff under President Ronald Reagan and President George H.W. Bush, and was the United States Secretary of the Treasury from February 3, 1985 to August 17, 1988. He is presently a senior partner in the law firm of Baker Botts and honorary chairman of the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University. This interview was conducted on November 2, 2012. The emphasis added is the Secretary's own.*

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ones. I do not believe that conflict with China, for instance, is inevitable. But should the day come—and I sincerely hope it does *not*—when we must contain China, we would be wise to find potential partners. These will include our treaty allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia. But we may also need to look to other powers in the region, notably India, and perhaps even Vietnam and Russia.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *You have expressed skepticism in the past about American military interventions in foreign humanitarian crises where there are not vital U.S. interests at stake. You've also advocated careful, selective engagement to safeguard U.S. power. How would you evaluate the decision to intervene in Libya? Do you support the calls to more actively engage in Syria, either through arming the opposition or creating channels for aid?*

**BAKER:** I believe that we should be very wary of “wars of choice,” whatever their purpose. I supported, with misgivings, the decision to intervene in Libya because: a) the humanitarian situation was acute, b) the cost of an air campaign, in human and financial terms, was limited, and c) the risk of open-ended U.S. involvement was minimal. I believe that our overriding priority in addressing the ongoing crisis within Syria is to contain the conflict. In particular, we need to help friendly countries such as Turkey and Jordan to protect their borders and airspace. I would not foreclose the idea of providing more support to the Syrian rebels. But, even as we do, we must be careful about weapons falling into the hands of extreme jihadists and entangling the United States too deeply in Syria’s domestic conflict. We should handle cases like Libya and Syria on a case-by-case basis. This is not inconsistent with a broader commitment to regional stability.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *As Secretary of State, you were closely involved with mitigating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. You've recently said that President Obama erred by not sticking to his position that Israel should freeze settlement activity. Do you think that Congress would support a U.S. president threatening to withhold U.S. aid to Israel in the current environment? More broadly, do you see any future administration exercising this kind of pressure?*

**BAKER:** I wish I were more confident about the prospects for a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The situation on the ground is hardly auspicious. Palestinians remain deeply divided between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. The ongoing expansion of settlements in the West Bank makes it increasingly difficult for the Israeli government to compromise. Any plausible settlement will require concessions on both sides. It is

the task of the United States as honest broker to encourage such compromise. I *do* believe that President Obama erred by not sticking to his position on a settlement freeze. The reason: having called for such a freeze so often and so publically, the Obama administration's unwillingness to follow through damaged our credibility with Palestinians and Israelis alike. I suspect that there will be an opportunity to revive U.S.-sponsored peace talks next year. But let me be blunt: the window for a two-state solution is closing, perhaps rapidly. The next administration will have to move quickly to revive talks—even if this means Congressional criticism.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *You once famously said to the Israelis, “when you’re serious about peace, call us.” Do you believe right now that the Israeli government is serious about peace, or do they believe that the status quo favors them and that they have little interest in negotiations? If they were willing to make concessions on settlements, do you believe the current Palestinian leadership would be a willing partner?*

**BAKER:** I take Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu at his word when he says that his government is interested in substantive talks. At present, Hamas may not be a suitable partner for direct negotiations. But the Palestinian Authority under President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad most assuredly is. In the short-run, the status quo may favor Israel. But, in the longer term, a two-state solution is the best guarantor both of the security of Israel and of its survival as a Jewish and democratic state.

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**FLETCHER FORUM:** *Additionally, how—if at all—do you believe the election of the Muslim Brotherhood to the presidency in Egypt will affect Egyptian-Israeli relations? Does the election of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the moderate Islamist Ennahda party in Tunisia affect U.S. policy in the region? Should the U.S. be concerned about Islamist candidates who come to power in free and fair elections?*

**BAKER:** Whether we like it or not, Islamist parties are going to be a part—and an *important* part—of the Middle East's emerging democratic landscape. We are speaking of parties, we should note, that vary widely in their stances on domestic and foreign policy; a one-size-fits-all approach to them risks forgoing opportunities for potential cooperation. Our number

one priority should be ensuring that such parties do not pursue policies, when in power, that are injurious to U.S. interests. In particular, we should impress upon Islamist parties that we expect cooperation on combating terrorism and fulfillment of solemn international obligations, such as the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *During the Cold War, the United States considered preemptive military strikes against the Chinese and the Soviet nuclear programs, but ultimately decided against it. Both countries were run by revolutionary regimes that had made hostility towards the United States a hallmark of their domestic and foreign policy, and both sponsored other revolutionary insurgent movements and armed groups. What makes Iran different today, and should the United States be willing to go to war in order to stop the Iranians from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability?*

**BAKER:** I consider it imperative that Iran be stopped from developing and deploying nuclear weaponry. Were Iran to become a nuclear power, it would introduce even more instability into one of the most unsettled areas in the world, and perhaps set off a regional nuclear arms race. The United States

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cannot be sanguine about either prospect. I support continued and, indeed, even more stringent international sanctions against Tehran. I would also keep open the option of military action against Iran's nuclear facilities should Tehran continue down its dangerous path of brinksmanship.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *Managing relations with the Chinese was a key part of your portfolio both as Secretary of the Treasury and during your tenure as Secretary of State. The U.S. relationship with China promises to be one of the most important of the twenty-first century, and we've already seen the issue of currency manipulation and trade play a role in the U.S. presidential contest. What specific advice would you offer the new administration for dealing with the Chinese currency issue, while being mindful of the security challenges in East Asia and the need to enlist Chinese cooperation on other global issues?*

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**BAKER:** China's huge accumulation of dollar reserves is strong evidence that Beijing is, in fact, manipulating its currency. But we should bear two things in mind as we deal with China. First, as I learned as Secretary of State, private diplomacy works best with Beijing. Public denunciation of Chinese policy will serve little purpose; indeed, if the past is any guide, it may prompt a sharp and counterproductive response. Second, China's trade surpluses are symptomatic of a broader bilateral economic imbalance: the asymmetry of savings between the two countries. At some oversimplification, the United States consumes too much while China consumes too little. One important way that we can increase our national savings is by implementing an effective plan to reduce our deficit and slow the growth of our debt. When we do so, we will be in a far better position to press China to increase domestic consumption by revaluing its currency and making U.S. and other imports cheaper.

The bottom line: addressing the emergence of China as a world power will likely be the most important geopolitical challenge we face in future decades. We will need China's cooperation on issues as varied as stability in the Middle East and promoting global economic growth. We must be careful—*very* careful—about managing U.S.-Chinese relations in ways that minimize unnecessary conflict. There is no better way to find an enemy than to go looking for one.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *Having seen the evolution of the U.S.-Russia relationship after the fall of communism and up to the present, how do you see that relationship evolving in the next several years, particularly as the two countries clash over Syria and other regional issues? How would you characterize the success or failure of the Obama administration's "reset" policy? Do you share the opinion of some American policymakers that Russia should actually be regarded as a foe rather than a partner?*

**BAKER:** Russia is neither an enemy nor an ally. It is a country with which we have both common and divergent interests. Among the former is a reduction of our nuclear weapons arsenals. I supported, with some qualifications, the New START treaty. I support further negotiations to reduce U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals. There is no point in the United States and Russia maintaining sufficient strategic weapons to destroy each other several times over. But we must also be prepared to call Russia to task when, for instance, it meddles in the affairs of its neighbors in the "Near Abroad" or obstructs international action on Iran and Syria. We should have no illusions: for the foreseeable future, Washington's relations with Moscow are *not* going to be smooth. But they can still be productive. And we should always recall that Russia does

not represent anything approaching the threat posed by the Soviet Union.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *How would you compare the role of Congress and partisanship in U.S. foreign policy during your time as Secretary of State to today? Is there more willingness today for political leaders to use foreign policy issues for domestic political gain?*

**BAKER:** The idea that we *ever* enjoyed unanimity on foreign policy is a fantasy. Throughout the Cold War—from China policy in the late 1940s, through the Vietnam War in the 1960s, to strategic missile defense during the Reagan Administration—foreign policy was the subject of vociferous, often partisan debate. And, speaking as someone deeply involved in national campaigns for several decades, I can also tell you that American politics has *always* been a contact sport.

I nonetheless believe that we are experiencing an unparalleled partisan polarization. Indeed, it sometimes seems that “compromise” has become a dirty word in Washington. Politics are no longer merely rough-and-tumble; all-too-often, they have become a battle to the death. I’m not sure of the reasons for this development. I suspect that the 24-hour news cycle and the rise of partisan news outlets have something to do with it. The former has led to a constant attempt to manage the news to political advantage; the latter has created ideological “echo chambers” where extreme positions are repeated and reinforced. This polarization is perhaps most severe—and dangerous—when it comes to addressing our current fiscal crisis. But, if trends continue, we can expect the current polarization of our politics to impair the ability of our government across the board, including foreign affairs and security policy.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *Lastly, is there any specific advice that you would offer students of politics and international relations who are interested in working in public service, but are concerned with job prospects and what some see as toxic levels of partisanship?*

**BAKER:** My advice is simple: don’t despair. Despite our current difficulties, the United States is an extraordinary country. In my lifetime alone, we have recovered from the Great Depression, won World War II, ended racial segregation, and prevailed in the Cold War. Along the way, we’ve created a society of freedom, opportunity, and abundance, which, though far from perfect, should be an object of justifiable pride for all Americans. If there’s one thing I’ve learned in my eighty-odd years, it’s this: betting against the United States is always a fool’s wager. To today’s young people interested in public service I say: get informed and get involved! Our country and the world need you. ■