

Testimony of Ryan Crocker

Nonresident Senior Fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

America Forward: Restoring Diplomacy and Development in a Fractured World

February 24, 2021

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McCaul, it is an honor to appear before you today to discuss these important issues. It is hard to imagine a more timely and critical topic for America's national security.

I will begin with the second element of the hearing title – the fractured world. As we look at the world today, it is important to try gain some perspective. What has been the state of the world in previous times and what does that tell us about what we face now. This means taking a long look at history, something we Americans are not disposed to do. We ignore it at our peril. It need not be a long trip – a 100 years or so, back to the time of the first World War and its aftermath. In an important sense, it was the war that no one wanted. The assassination of a relatively minor member of the Hapsburg monarchy in what was then the even more obscure town of Sarajevo lit a fuse that blew up Europe. The United States was a late entry in the war, reflecting an inherent sense of caution over involvement in the - “foreign entanglements” our founders warned against. But it was decisive. The force of American arms demonstrated to Europe that a new power had arisen across the Atlantic. President Woodrow Wilson also hoped to win the peace through his 14 Points, because “The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty.”

That was not going to happen. The leaders of Britain and France, Lloyd George and Clemenceau, respectively, had little interest in such concepts, and even less in a leading role for the upstart Americans in the post-war peace talks at Versailles. Wilson did see the establishment of his League of Nations, but the 1918 Congressional elections returned an isolationist Senate that refused to ratify the agreement, and without the US, the League was dead on arrival. European affairs were back in the hands of Europe. It was the same balance of power system that was in place before the first World War; the only difference was that the balances had shifted.

It did not go well. Only two decades separated the two world wars; in Europe, it seemed more like one long war divided by a 20 year truce. It did not seem imaginable that the savagery of World War I could be exceeded, but it was. In addition to the carnage on the battlefields, the world witnessed the Holocaust, genocide and mass extermination on an industrial scale. US use of nuclear weapons shortened the war and almost certainly produced fewer casualties than would have been the case had the US been forced to invade Japan, but these weapons also served as a warning that a WW III could destroy the earth.

America moved to center stage, preparing for a post-war world in which the US would lead. Preparations began while war still raged, at Dumbarton Oaks in 1944 and then in San Francisco in 1945 where the United Nations was born. Also in 1944, the Bretton Woods Agreement was signed,

establishing a post-war international financial order and moving the world from the gold standard to the US dollar. NATO followed in 1949, a security alliance outside the United Nations system – and a Soviet veto. So unlike the situation after WW I, there really was a new international order, created and led by the United States. This was not a balance of power arrangement that had produced two world wars; it was the beginning of an era of American ascendancy in the free world. Not domination, but leadership. It was embraced by President Truman and his successors, Republican and Democrat, in the decades that followed. It was far from perfect – Vietnam and Iraq come to mind. But over the decades since 1945, we did not see global conflagration. After the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union collapsed, coincident with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and Kuwait's liberation in February 1991, President George H. W. Bush used the term “new world order” to describe a post-cold war era in which U.S. global ascendancy continued, much as it did during the Soviet era. It was never a unipolar world in which the US was a global dictator as our adversaries asserted. But the need for US leadership remained.

That need was underscored a few years later when violence broke out in the Balkans. President Clinton was reluctant to engage the US, pointing out that this was a European problem, and the Europeans needed to fix it. Except the Europeans couldn't, as the horrific massacre of Bosnian men and boys in Srebrenica demonstrated. The US stepped in, and by the end of 1995, a broad agreement to end the violence was signed at Dayton. That would be Dayton Ohio, not Dayton France.

That assumption of a global leadership role began to change when President Obama took office. WW II was a very long time ago. Other issues, issues at home, demanded our attention. Even before assuming the Presidency, President Obama spoke of our so-called allies in the Middle East and free riders in NATO. By the time he left, relationships with our traditional allies in the Middle East were at their lowest ebb in decades. Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey (not a Middle Eastern country, but under the Ottomans it owned most of it) felt that US interest in the region had declined to the point where leaders needed to look after their own national security interests without reference to the US. A dramatic illustration of that point came in 2015 when Saudi Arabia notified the US through military channels that it was going to take military action in Yemen against Iranian backed Houthi rebels that the Saudis considered an unacceptable security threat. They did not ask our views. They told us what they were going to do, and made clear they were doing so not to get our permission but because they needed some enablers that only the US could provide. But with or without those enablers, they were going to fight. That intervention has not gone well, to say the least. President Biden did the right thing to end that support. But had we maintained a stronger relationship with Saudi Arabia, we might have been able to avoid that conflict in the first place. In other words, diplomacy was not given a chance. In Egypt, President Sisi made a memorable comment at a meeting I attended in New York: he regretted that he had a better relationship with the Israeli Prime Minister than with the American President. Jordan's King Abdullah, one of our staunchest allies in the Middle East, publicly lamented that he had more faith in American power than the American Administration did. President Obama also demonstrated that the US does not in fact end wars by withdrawing forces from the battlefield. In the case of Iraq, that simply gave the space to Iran and the Islamic State. He almost did the same thing in Afghanistan. The irony is that President Trump, otherwise focused on undoing virtually everything President Obama had done, followed the Obama playbook on Afghanistan. The double irony is that it is the wrong playbook.

To be fair, President Obama also supported some very significant measures to strengthen the international order and the US role in it. The Transpacific Partnership was a major step toward isolating and pressuring China. The Paris Climate Accords significantly strengthened an international approach on

climate change. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was a good arms control agreement, limiting Iran's capacity to develop nuclear weapons. President Trump undid all of these with a stroke of a pen. In so doing, he increased the threats to American and global security. And in doing so by executive order, he has created a long term problem for our diplomacy. American Presidents do not even attempt to get Senate ratification for international agreements. That part of our system no longer works. Instead, they are put into effect by executive order. As ambassador in Iraq and Afghanistan, I negotiated long term bilateral strategic partnership agreements, significant enough for Presidents Bush and Obama to travel to Baghdad and Kabul respectively to sign them. The leaders in both countries were required to submit the agreements to their respective parliaments for ratification. In both cases, I was asked what assurance there was that the next American President would not withdraw from the agreements, also by executive order. My response was that while it was theoretically possible, it had never happened. Now it has, and we will feel the impact for years to come.

So what does all of this have to do with restoring diplomacy and development? What we do in these areas is very much a function of the role we choose to play in the world. If we are going to lead, and it is clear that the Biden Administration intends that we should, we will require robust and sustained initiatives to strengthen and improve our diplomatic and development capabilities. But we must understand the gravity of the choice before us. As President Biden has said, the world – this fractured world – will not organize itself. We have the opportunity to lead again. If we choose otherwise, we must not delude ourselves about the possible consequences. We will default to some form of a balance of power system, and that is why I have tried to lay out what that system has brought in the past. The Holocaust is still in living memory. Do we honestly think that human nature has improved to the point where such things never happen again? If the US chooses not to lead, the danger is not that China will replace us. It can't. No one can. The forces of entropy are at work. Our NATO partners unsure of their direction as the US drifts. European Union solidarity is frayed. There is greater divisiveness now than at any point since WW II. Today's world, in short, is moving in directions that present a very real danger to us all. As one small example, I serve on the board of directors for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, created early in the Cold War to counter Soviet disinformation and bring the truth to people under Soviet rule. Today, the rise of authoritarians in Russia and elsewhere have made the mission of RFE/RL as important as ever. The past is prologue.

The Biden Administration, with decades of collective experience in global affairs, understands this. Steps are already underway to reweave our ties in NATO. In the process, I think the new Administration is sending another important message. This is Biden I. It is not Obama III. President George H.W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker sent a very similar message when they came to office in January 1989. The country and the Congress were badly divided then, largely over President Reagan's Central America policies. The Bush Administration worked to lessen those divisions at a critical time for our country and for the world. As I have noted, the challenges were immense: the collapse of the East Bloc, the fall of the Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. Panama, Iraq/Kuwait, Tiananmen Square. Leadership abroad and a necessary minimum of bipartisanship at home brought us through some very rough waters. Today, the divisions and the challenges abroad are even greater. This Committee, now and under previous leadership, has shown the way forward: engagement on the critical issues confronting our nation in a spirit of bipartisanship that should be the norm, not the exception.

This hearing is an example of that focus. To protect our national security and sustain our values in this fractured world, we must utilize all the instruments of our power. The more we can do with diplomacy

and development, the less we have to do with our military. None in this country appreciate that more than our civilian and military defense leaders. That was an article of faith for former Defense Secretary Mattis as it is for Secretary Austin, with whom I served in Iraq. The proposition must always be diplomacy and defense, never diplomacy versus defense.

There are two overarching issues I would like to address before turning to more specific ideas. They both begin with R: Resources and Risk. The State Department and USAID have been chronically underfunded for decades. We all pay a price for this. USAID has been hollowed out to the point where USAID officers are essentially contract managers rather than long term development specialists which is what they are trained to do. I saw this clearly in Iraq. As our surge of forces took hold and enabled political compromises by Iraqis, violence plummeted. Our military commanders had substantial resources through the Commanders' Emergency Response Program (CERP) and were being pressed to utilize them quickly. Field commanders had no expertise in development and wanted USAID advisors. They were simply not available in anywhere near the numbers that were needed. A great deal has changed since USAID was established. We are no longer in the business of major infrastructure projects. A primary focus now are programs in governance and capacity building. These are less expensive and more complex, requiring implementers who know the programs and also know the environment in which they are being executed. What are the needs and wants of those we are trying to support? These skills are best grown at home, not contracted out. To be fully effective as an agent of positive global change, USAID needs a significant increase in personnel.

For the State Department and the Foreign Service, our sole source of capital is our people. They are literally the life blood of diplomacy. But we often behave as though the opposite is true. For example, former Secretary Tillerson instituted a hiring freeze to stay in effect until he had worked through a complete reorganization of the Department. That never happened. The freeze was reversed when Secretary Pompeo took over, but a great deal of damage had already been done. The smartest and most gifted who had made their way through a very rigorous screening process and were awaiting appointments took other jobs. Potential applicants decided not to bother even taking the Foreign Service exam. And it is a gift that keeps on giving – the vacuum in the system created by the freeze will continue for the next several decades, the length of a normal Foreign Service career. We are just getting over the bubble created in a similar freeze in the late 1990s.

We do not have the resources to fund in service education at the level it should be. The military will fund education for its officers through the Phd level. That is unheard of at State. I was lucky to get a year of university training. In the mid-1980s, after three years in Beirut, I was able to spend a year at Princeton's Department of Near East studies. It made me a far more effective officer in the region where I spent my career, and was, I think, a pretty good return on investment. But we make far fewer investments than we should – the resources are not there. There are many other examples of the way our people are shortchanged. In the military, officers are almost always relieved in place, meaning that an officer departing an assignment overlaps with her successor. It insures a smooth transition and a handover of accumulated knowledge. This does not happen in the Foreign Service. There are gaps, not overlaps. And these gaps can last six months or longer. These problems are interrelated. The personnel shortages that create gaps are also the reason there are few opportunities for in service education and details outside the Department. For example, the Pentagon sends dozens of officers to work in State Department offices where they learn a great deal about State Department culture and how the world

looks from Foggy Bottom. We do not have Foreign Service officers in the Pentagon. On the Hill, we do have a few officers serving in Congressional offices. We need many more.

Risks. I have taken a few during my career. I have seen it as part of the business. You can manage it, but you can't eliminate it. Since the second World War, more ambassadors have been killed in the line of duty than general officers in the military. Again, a look back is instructive. In April 1983, the Embassy in Beirut was hit with a massive car bomb. I am a survivor of that attack. Six months later, the Marine barracks at the Beirut airport was also bombed. That attack forced a US military withdrawal, exactly what the perpetrators wanted. But it did not fundamentally change the way the US military operates. The embassy bombing did change the way the State Department operated. Physical security standards were enacted that hardened embassies around the world and set rigorous standards for new construction. More fundamentally, it changed the way Washington, including Congress, thought about security and risk. Risk management became risk avoidance. When ambassadors assume their posts they receive a presidential letter laying out their duties and responsibilities. I received such a letter when I went to Iraq in 2007. It said in part that I had no higher responsibility than the safety of the personnel under my jurisdiction. I went back to Washington to say that we were in a war in Iraq. If my highest priority in a war is the safety of my people, they needed another ambassador. The letter was rewritten to drop that paragraph, and Accountability Review Boards, required by law, did not travel to post. This was specific to Iraq (and later Afghanistan), however, and it didn't change the thinking in Washington about risk. The aftermath of the murder of my friend and colleague Chris Stevens and three companions in Libya made that clear. There were issues and actions that contributed to the loss of life. These were identified and action was taken pursuant to the Accountability Review Board report of December 2012. The other nine investigations contributed very little of substance, but did send the message that there was an absolute requirement to find someone at fault, possibly criminally at fault. This is crippling our diplomacy and it has to change. A major part of that change will require Congressional action to rewrite the Omnibus Diplomatic Security Act of 1986. I recently served on an Advisory Group for an American Academy of Diplomacy report, Changing the Risk Paradigm for US Diplomats. It is worth your attention. Simply put, the mission of the State Department and the Foreign Service must be the implementation of major national security imperatives, not keeping people safe.

In sum, the development of a Foreign Service with the skills, strength and flexibility to execute a diplomatic strategy consistent with US global leadership require a major and sustained increase in resources and a recalculation of risk. These are imperatives. There are a number of other steps that need to be taken, but without these two prerequisites, it will be hard to make meaningful change elsewhere. I would like to underscore that implicit in these suggestions is my conviction that we need to strengthen the Foreign Service, not to develop new structures or organizations. However well intentioned, such measures will weaken, not strengthen, our capacity to achieve our national security goals abroad

Much work has been done recently on this subject. The most comprehensive is the Harvard Belfer Center's report, A U.S. Diplomatic Service for the 21st Century. Here are some of the recommendations I consider most important:

- A new Foreign Service Act. Just as the 1986 Omnibus Diplomatic Security Act needs to be rewritten, so does the 1980 Foreign Service Act. There is much in the 1980 Act that should be retained, especially the affirmation of the leadership role of Ambassadors, and merit based

selections and promotions. But much has changed. Globalization has brought hardships as well as opportunities. Technological developments have dramatically changed the ways we develop and use information. Climate change is a potentially existential threat. A revised Act should be the result of close collaboration between Congress and the Administration.

- Diversity. Much has been said about diversity, much less has been done. A new Foreign Service Act must address this. The immense challenges our country faces require that we draw on all elements of our population. Concrete programs must be developed and funded. For example, the Belfer report has suggested a diplomatic ROTC program for underrepresented college students.
- Limits on the number of non-career Ambassadors and Assistant Secretaries.
- A significant increase in training and education opportunities, and a significant increase in the overall size of the Service to make that possible.

All of this will require resources and political will. In my view, it is absolutely necessary. I have looked to the past to illustrate what the world was like without US leadership. Our self-imposed slide away from that role, especially during the Trump Presidency, is reversible if we can muster a bipartisan commitment to lead. This is America. We can do this. We need to move now.