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Thinking about Foreign Policy

by Sheldon Richman

The reason there is so much sloppy thinking about foreign policy among libertarians (not to mention nearly everyone else) is that most people don't know how to approach the subject. You can see this whenever someone uses analogies such as the bully on a playground or the madman with a baby strapped to his chest drawing his machine gun in a crowded mall. As we'll see below, these tempting analogies have nothing to do with foreign policy. If we let them guide our thinking we will come to erroneous conclusions.

As amazing as this will sound, the most fundamental problem of foreign-policy analysis — even among libertarians — is the absence of the state. If you look closely at most discussions, you will notice that government plays an insignificant role in the story. This is especially true in discussions about American foreign policy. There is an implicit assumption that the state's actual role is to carry out the wishes of the people, as if they were the principal decision-makers in the matter. Once the discussion moves onto that track, all hope for a sensible conclusion is lost.

Of all people, libertarians ought to have no trouble seeing that before one can talk about foreign policy, one has to be straight about the nature of the foreign-policy maker. The people do not make foreign policy. The state does; or, more precisely, the ruling elite, which includes influential corporate interests outside the formal organization of the state, makes foreign policy. The people no more make foreign policy than they make any other kind of policy. In fact, they are further removed from issues of war and foreign intervention than they are from domestic issues.

In foreign matters the state has the greatest leeway and privacy to do what it wants. There is no equivalent of classified material for Social Security or environmental regulation. On the other hand, it is easy for government officials to keep information about foreign relations from the people, although such information may be used to justify sending some of them to their deaths.

The state's unique characteristics are clear to libertarians when they think about domestic policy. Bring up Social Security or regulation, and most libertarians can recite exhaustive moral, economic, and political reasons why government should not be involved. The moral reason will center on the illegitimacy of initiating physical force. The economic reasons will often be a mix of

Austrian and Public Choice analysis. If the subject is regulation a well-versed libertarian will point out that government cannot make the calculations required to weigh costs and benefits *and* that self-regarding government officials face perverse incentives, guaranteeing that the interests of the individuals who make up the general public will not be the driving force behind whatever policy is formulated.

These are sound objections, constituting part of the rich critique libertarianism can make about government intervention in the economy.

So why do so many libertarians forget them when the talk turns to foreign policy? Instead of a self-seeking, corrupt, and coercive entity, government is suddenly regarded as a faithful servant that gauges the legitimate interests of the national community, then faithfully carries out policies designed to secure those interests. Good faith is accorded the state. But why? Is the state a different sort of entity when its focus is the military and relations with other countries?

Foreign policy and the state

If we are to think squarely about foreign policy we must return to square one. Foreign policy is carried on by the state, and the state is a unique organization in any society. It is the only organization that may legally initiate physical force (and the threat thereof) against those who have used neither force nor fraud against others. This creates an unparalleled set of characteristics and incentives, and fosters a class division between those, on the one hand, who wield power and benefit from wielding it, and those, on the other, who are on the receiving end of that power. In brief, government may exploit people under the authority of the law. The most basic power is the power to tax, without which no other power could be exercised. The power to coercively extract wealth from a population immediately sets up two groups: the taxpayers and the tax consumers. In a democratic society the possibility of attaining power is open to more people than in an aristocratic society, creating an incentive for many people to contend for a share of that power. But although under democracy the tax-consuming class is more fluid than under other political systems, the exploiter-exploited framework is preserved. Some have the power to tax others to carry out their objectives. (It doesn't matter that the tax collectors may believe the objectives are good for the taxpayers.)

The dangerous temptation is to see the state as an agency that has been established *primarily* to protect life, liberty, and property. This idea comes from the various social-contract theories which have imagined that a group of people long ago decided that the state of nature was inadequate and formed a government to resolve disputes, keep internal order, and protect against invasion. But this was never proffered as a historical event, and one is hard-pressed to find a government that was originally established that way. Governments were initially formed through conquest, and modern governments, even those in democratic countries, can be traced back to

earlier conquests. Whatever legitimacy such governments may have today, it does not come from the sort of tale told by the contractarians.

To be sure, governments use some of their populations' resources to keep order, deter crime, and prevent invasions. But that is largely motivated by their desire to preserve the goose that lays the golden eggs. That desire is summed up in the old libertarian bumper sticker "Don't Steal. Government Hates Competition."

Security and the state

This is the agency that has charge of foreign policy. It is therefore odd indeed to expect foreign policy to be concerned *in any primary sense* with the well-being of its subject population. As Public Choice teaches us, the state's first objective is to preserve and augment its own power and security to the greatest extent possible. Historian Robert Higgs has documented in great detail that the surest path to aggrandizement is for the state to instill and exploit fear in "its" people. H.L. Mencken perceptively said,

The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary.

Nothing stimulates uncritical allegiance like anxiety about foreign enemies. But efforts to create such anxiety create insecurity. When governments intervene in affairs of other countries, they make their own populations less safe by creating enemies. Even measures intended as defensive can appear to be offensive to the other side.

The upshot is that looking to government to create security in foreign affairs is like asking the fox to guard the henhouse. It has a natural interest in doing things that will jeopardize security. This is especially true of a world power, and most true of all for a lone superpower. The U.S. government furnishes a perfect example. America's geographic position and wealth made nonintervention highly practicable and low-risk, yet successive governments refused to abstain from meddling in foreign affairs, which served only to endanger the people they claimed to protect.

Keeping in mind the full context of how foreign policy is formulated, we can easily see through the popular fallacies that undermine so much thinking about war and peace. Discussions of the Iraq war, for example, were riddled with analogies about bullies on playgrounds and hostage-taking, machine-gun-wielding sociopaths in crowded shopping malls. All such analogies fail in that one cannot deduce what ought to be done in an international "crisis" from what one would reasonably do in the scenarios presented. We may concede that one can stop a playground bully from terrorizing innocent children or risk the life of a hostage to keep someone from mowing down a crowd with his machine gun. But what does that have to do with foreign policy?

Those simple scenarios have none of the complications of government action on the world stage. They are emergencies, and stopping them does not require a state with all its perverse incentives and powers. In neither scenario is there an organization that seeks to hold power by creating or exaggerating threats or that socializes its costs by taxing its population and perhaps conscripting its soldiers. In each scenario a person acting to restore security has an incentive to avoid harming innocents, for he, unlike the state, is responsible for his recklessness, negligence, and maliciousness. His mission is not to kill, even if that becomes necessary as a last resort. None of this can be said of the state's conduct in foreign affairs.

Any analogy that omits the state is irrelevant and ought to be dismissed. Another reason for this is that in the world of state relations, threats and aggressive acts rarely come out of the blue but rather are preceded by provocations. Americans grow up believing that the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor was an unexpected act of treachery, but that's because their schoolbooks and news media never told them of the long prelude of economic warfare committed against the Japanese by the Roosevelt administration. The point is not to excuse the attack, but to understand it. Likewise, the 9/11 attacks were not the beginning of a conflict with Arabs and Muslims. For 50 years the U.S. government had pursued policies and backed regimes in the Middle East that were responsible for thousands of deaths and much hardship. Again, the point is not to excuse but to understand. Americans rarely see their government's policies through the eyes of those who suffer them.

If libertarians are to be consistent, they must never forget that the noninterventionist principle applies to foreign as well as to domestic policy.

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