

**Unconditional Surrender, Restraint in Foreign Policy, Relationships and Breaking up?  
What Happens Next – 9.12.2021  
Barry Posen QA**

Larry Bernstein:

Let's start out with liberal hegemony. Why did it come to dominate diplomatic circles for so long? And why are its leaders still defending it as the appropriate US strategy given the record?

Barry Posen:

Well, I wish I had an answer that satisfied me to your question but I don't. I think it's a confluence of three things at the end of the Cold War. One is, given the way the Soviet Union came apart, we did have a sudden movement in international politics, and what we had long thought was a bipolar world, basically dominated by two great powers, to what was essentially a unipolar world, where if you ordered powers, the United States was not just number one. There were missing slots for powers, two, three, and four. And the rest of the countries in the world were just not very capable then. And that kind of power advantage is a really heady why.

Second is, where and how the Cold War ended, which is, the Cold War ended with the Americans out there in the world. It ended with a frontier. And that frontier was well extended. And on the frontiers of empires, especially with those power vacuums, there's a tendency to keep trying to pacify the frontier. Third is, the ideological elements to the Cold War is basically the liberals against whatever you want to call it, reactionaries, totalitarians, autocrats, whatever term you want to use and the cold war seemed to vindicate the superiority of our system.

So we took it as a moment to basically do something that has had a long tradition in American thought about international politics, which has transformed international politics once and for all. And this is why the American elite moved from trying to take what was a successful, largely, but not entirely liberal, capitalist, anti-Soviet coalition, and grow that into a liberal, capitalist, US-led world order. But just because I can say those things and spell out the history and talk about the big causes, doesn't mean I'm really that confident in my assessment of why it turned out the way it did.

Kenneth Pyle:

Barry, this is Ken. I've just finished reading a book that's getting a lot of attention among China scholars. It's written by Rush Doshi who is Biden's advisor on China on the NSC, National Security Council.

Barry Posen:

I saw the review. I didn't read the book.

Kenneth Pyle:

It's called *The Long Game* and its subtitle is, *China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. And as I was reading it, and knowing that I had this session coming up with you, I was surprised to find he refers to you as someone who might favor an accommodation with China of some sort. He says something to the effect that even Barry Posen doesn't favor a maximalist grand bargain with China as though you might support some other kind of accommodation. So I'm wondering how you feel about a policy of restraint applying to China today. You've just said that you see the control of the Eurasian continent as critical to our security. And so I'm wondering how you feel about China today.

Barry Posen:

Well, as a card-carrying realist, I can't help but notice the vast increase in Chinese economic power and the concomitant increase in its military power in the last 20 years. And that makes China a candidate for regional hegemony in Asia. I have not read Rush's book. I've seen a review. The Chinese might, in their more excited moments, imagine Chinese world hegemony, but if they do, it means they haven't looked at a map and they haven't done their sums. So I don't think that's in the cards.

Now, the question of what the relationship between China and the United States and the other Asian powers would be, I think that is in the cards. I think that is up for competition, but also up for negotiation. Now, unlike Rush, I'm not confident I understand exactly what China wants in Asia. I think that, like most great powers in the first instance, it would like a world where American military power is not entirely at its throat. And there's an old cartoon from the '60s that features a bemedaled American general pointing at a map saying, "Mr. President, our defense problems would be much easier if people stopped building their countries near our bases." And that's because our bases are everywhere.

Now, the United States needs some basis in Asia to be able to assist countries there in defending themselves, and to be able to defend whatever interests we have. But at the same time, I think the United States should think very carefully about military deployments that have the dual effect of making the Chinese think we're getting ready to come after them. And this is a very hard line to walk, but I think it's a walk. It's a line that we need to think about. And if we look at the way the US military tends to do its military planning, the way they think about war is to go for the throat. It's not so different than the strategy you describe against the Japanese in World War II. So these are things that we have to work with.

And as far as shared leadership of global politics, again, I'm not even really sure I know what this means, but I think on some issues it's kind of inevitable that we have to cooperate with China. So if we accept the inevitability of cooperation with them on some issues, maybe we better accept that we're going to be cooperating with them.

I mean, as far as I can tell, everyone's crisis of the moment is climate change, and it's a tough problem to solve. And it can't be solved unless the most advanced industrial states in the world cooperate. United States and China have to cooperate to address this problem. And it seems to me we're going the other way, which is we're taking one issue after another, whether it's military, whether it's economic, or technological, and we are turning them into zero-sum issues.

So, as I said earlier, I'm a little bit humble about my ability to prescribe a grand strategy for Asia. But I think the direction in which we're going is quite disturbing and I think requires a lot more thought before we embark upon it.

Kenneth Pyle:

The issue that is really drawing critical attention, and I've heard the last three PACOM commanders talk about this just recently is Taiwan. In your book, you say events are moving China's way, and this may not be the place to make a stand. So Taiwan is the critical issue at the moment, I think. And I wonder how you feel about that.

Barry Posen:

Well, in a perfect world, the United States would have gotten out of its commitment we have with Taiwan. It is a weird one because, for all the historical reasons that you know, it doesn't have that NATO quality to it. There were no American forces on Taiwan, because we agreed with the Chinese a long time ago that we weren't going to organize things that way. And we did it for a reason. So if it were up to me, we'd just shake and lose the commitment 10, 15 years ago when we were strong. We would have basically said, Taiwan has to stand on its own two feet, and we would have made the point that both Taiwan and China agree that there was one China and it's time for the Taiwanese to start working that out with the Chinese.

Unfortunately it's kind of too late for that. So the question is, what's the next best thing? And I think we need to get, and I'm quite critical of the American military, because it's really willing to kind of ring the warning klaxon without talking about the possible military solutions. On the one hand, I think Taiwan is an island that's easy to defend. I think China would find it very, very hard to conquer Taiwan. And there's many things that the Taiwanese can do to make itself hard to conquer. And there's many things that the Americans could do that aren't particularly offensive. I mean that in a tactical military sense, to help the Taiwanese defend themselves.

But here is the problem. We do not have the military capability to end a China-Taiwan-US war on our terms. For all the arguments that have to do with the power of Chinese nationalism and the sheer size of the Chinese state and its military power, the United States is not going to get China to unconditionally surrender Taiwan to be an independent state militarily. And if we try, it's going to be a military horror show that's going to run serious risk of nuclear escalation.

So I think that a war over Taiwan where Taiwan and the United States could initially be successful tactically still cannot end without a negotiated solution. In other words, just as you recommended negotiation for the past war with Japan, I believe that we will have to consider negotiation with China about Taiwan. And I think if we get through the initial stages of a war without major escalation to the use of nuclear weapons or something else, a lot of voices are going to suddenly start asking about negotiation.

I don't think Taiwan wants an endless war in the region. I don't think Japan will want an endless war in the region. I don't really think the US will want an endless war in the region.

So we're going to end up with a negotiated solution. And then that negotiated solution, it's not going to be the Chinese who give more. It's going to end up being Taiwan. Now, if we can see

that far ahead, then we probably better start considering that negotiation now, not later, because maybe we could avoid the war altogether.

Larry Bernstein:

You describe this war as just being between Taiwan, China, and the US, but there's also India, Japan, and Australia, and what they want, and what their fears of greater Chinese ambitions are. But when you have allies and you're not running the show entirely, it's more complicated and more nuanced with these additional players. What do these other players want and how will that change the dynamics of this dispute?

Barry Posen:

Well, it's pretty clear what the countries in Asia actually want. What they want to do is be able to trade with China and make a ton of money out of that trade and simultaneously feel militarily secure. And if there's a war, the trade goes away. And because of the risk associated with combat throughout Asia, feeling secure also goes away. And I presume what they would like is the war to be ended in a way that restores the possibilities of trade and also makes them feel more secure.

If you don't end the war early, it's going to be very hard to restore trade. And if you don't end the war before it becomes really, really ferocious, I think it's going to be pretty hard to restore a sense of security. So I'm recommending a kind of warfare here that people haven't waged in a long time. It's the kind of war that used to be waged in the 18th century, sometimes in the 19th century, but certainly not the 20th. It's limited war. And I'd prefer not have the war altogether.

Now, what role would Japan play in this war? I think Japan would certainly try and defend itself if the Chinese chose to expand the field of battle. Would the Japanese be enthusiastic participants if the Chinese had left them alone? I'm actually quite doubtful that they would be. There's nothing in the US-Japan security treaty that requires them to be in that war. And they certainly don't have a security treaty with Taiwan that requires them to be in that war. They can talk a good game now, but that's easy. The real question is, what are you going to bring to the table?

I think the Australians will certainly defend the sea lanes in the Pacific if the Chinese want to come out and try and harass them. But are the Australians really going to want to be in the war? Hard to say. They've been quite willing cooperators in the War in Afghanistan. They fought in Vietnam. Maybe they would.

I think you're right to bring up the possibility that different countries have different interests. India also. India would prefer that China not successfully expand by the sword. But is India willing to have the war spread to its entire land boundary with China over the question of whether Taiwan becomes independent or not? I think we shouldn't assume these things. Assuming that all these countries are going to line up and see their interests and having a war to the knife with China, I don't think that's going to be in their interest.

And I think if the Americans are going to end up leading this coalition, which they probably would, because they're going to be the greatest power, they have to consider war aims in a way that keeps everybody on side. And I don't think in contrast to World War II, unconditional

surrender was a way to keep everyone on side, especially the Soviets. I'm not sure it's going to be a good way to keep everyone on side if tragically we end up having this war with China over Taiwan.

Larry Bernstein:

John Lewis Gaddis wrote his book *Strategies of Containment*. And one of the important aspects was this concept of asymmetric response. The way you kind of described a Chinese aggression against Taiwan, which suggested the whole essence of the battle be referenced around securing and defending Taiwan. But it's a big world. You mentioned the Indian-Chinese border, and China has a lot to defend. It needs raw materials just like the Japanese did before World War II. China can't defend its sea lanes, particularly outside of the South China Sea. It has a lot to lose.

Barry Posen:

That's absolutely true. It does have a lot to lose.

Larry Bernstein:

If you were recommending a military action against the Chinese, assuming that China and Taiwan came to battle, would you recommend that the action be taken in the South China Sea to limit the war? Or would you take on China somewhere else?

Barry Posen:

It's hard to fix the pattern of the war in a conversation this brief. But my view is that if the United States is going to fight this war, it should try and fight it carefully. The Chinese have many debilities going into a war of this kind, and those debilities can put a lot of pressure on China. I don't think they can cause China to give up its objectives in Taiwan, but I think they can impose costs in a way that gives us a little bit of control over escalation.

So I think the observation you made is the right one. And that is that should this war occur and should the Americans be in this war, the Americans are going to make it pretty much impossible for China to import or export by sea. Command of the sea is something that I would say the United States, at least in the open oceans, still enjoys. In my book, I recommend the United States continue to invest heavily in maintaining that command. And because of the way the geography around China works, they are highly constrained in their access to the sea. So I don't believe the United States has to go into the South China Sea to exert this pressure on China, we just have to control the exits, and I think we can do that. And once we control the exits in the entrance, no Chinese ships are sailing in or out, and there's going to be no exports and there's going to be no imports. And this has the effect of forcing China back on dependency on trade with its land partners. And it really in a weird way puts them in the hands of the Russians. And the Chinese and the Russians are quite friendly right now. I don't think this is a friendship born of love.

It's born of interest and detestation of the United States and the fact that we're usually pushing both of them all the time. So I'm not sure this is a happy and comfortable situation. I don't think

the Russians in any sense are perfect substitutes for the massive import-export trade that China currently sustains. So I think this is a very high cost and I think this is an economical way to put military pressure on China. Any military pressure could be escalated, there was no way to fight a war without a risk of escalation, but I think this is a much more sensible way to apply pressure than some of the earlier ideas of the American military, which was to launch air raids deep into China, to try and attack China's nuclear forces with conventional bombs in the hopes of changing the nuclear balance, putting the Chinese nuclear deterrent at risk, trying to chase ... they never said this, but in the event, I'm sure they would try and chase Chinese regime leaders put their lives at risk.

This was the way the United States military used to like to think about fighting. I think they're starting to think better of it, because I think the Chinese are getting too strong, but there is this tendency in American strategy to operate this way. This is the way we plan to operate against the Soviet Union. And I don't think it's necessary in the first instance against China, because I think they do have the vulnerability that you described.

Kenneth Pyle:

Barry. This is Ken again. As I read you, the essence of the opposite of liberal hegemony is a kind of balance of power system.

Barry Posen:

That's correct.

Kenneth Pyle:

Yeah. One of the obstacles democracies have is appreciating diplomacy. And I saw that in the case of Japan in the Second World War as I mentioned. So the balance of power basically works only through accommodation. And the job of diplomats is to reach accommodation through persuasion and compromise, and that's very hard to do in a democracy. And when you say we should negotiate with China over a solution to Taiwan, I guess I'm very skeptical reading American public opinion today that any political leader could undertake that in the face of the kind of public opinion that exists today.

Barry Posen:

I think that's right, but one thing's for sure they won't do it if no one tells them to. In other words, as I said, I wrote this book not because I thought policymakers were going to have a Eureka moment and say, "Oh yes, we'll do what Posen says or his friends say." I wrote it so that critics of the present course of action would have a place to stand in a place to start. And one element of that place to stand to and place to start is to acknowledge that there are other great powers in the world and that when there are other great powers in the world, there are only so many choices. And to lay out what those choices are, so that Americans know that when they eschew diplomacy, when they eschew compromise, when they insist that the purpose of negotiation is for us to tell other people how things are going to be, and then for them to sign on the dotted line, that that plan has costs.

And if the American people in their wisdom are willing to pay those costs, then who am I to stop them? But they need to understand what those costs are and they need to understand there's another way to proceed. And then they can ask themselves how they feel about that. I don't make Asia my principal bailiwick, I concentrate mostly in Europe. But in Asia, the US detente with China involved a hard bitten realist named Richard Nixon, who at one time had been a very severe cold warrior and an ideologue, making a deal with China, because we wanted China's help in addressing the Soviet Union at a time when we thought our power was not up to the task.

And when we cut that deal, that's when the Americans agreed along with Taiwan and along with China, that there's one China, that Taiwan is not an independent country. We don't have that agreement with China. And every time we do something that challenges that agreement with China, we are going back on an arrangement we made. Taylor Freeville whose work I'm sure you know, is a colleague of mine. And I read his first book to say, one thing the Chinese are really neuralgic about is when people sit in any place where they have a disagreement with other countries about real estate. They may live with that disagreement for quite a long time, but they won't let it go backwards in the other side's favor. They may not insist that it moves forward in their favor, although lately they have been, but they sure get neuralgic when it starts moving the other way.

And probably because of Taiwan's adventurous diplomacy, and partly because of the encouragement of various actions in the United States, it starting to look to China like we're going backwards. And that's not to say that the Chinese are angels, they're not. They are also getting restless. So we're entering a very touchy period and it would be really good if people stopped to think. So, yes, I'm a realist. I would like to return to a world where people thought in terms of balance of power, where diplomacy, which is not only about talk, but also about mutual understanding, so the risk of war in the background, led to some sort of compromise or accommodation. But right now neither we nor the Chinese are in that kind of a mood. And I'm not going to just say, "Well, if they're not in the mood, then I give up, let's have the war." I want to remind people that that war is not pretty.

Larry Bernstein:

Maybe this is a good time to end on a note of optimism. Barry, what are you optimistic about, specifically about restraint as a policy?

Barry Posen:

Well, I'm not by nature, a wildly optimistic person.

One thing I am optimistic about is that this strategy, and again, I basically switched my former views on strategy to these views because I was persuaded by colleagues. I'm not the first person to make this argument. But when I first made this argument 10 or 15 years ago, I was the petulant child that was invited to the party because you couldn't leave him out. So I'd go to meetings with all my liberal hegemony friends, and they would give me five minutes to state my point and then they'd move on. Well, the debate has moved on now. Restraint is getting

entrenched in Washington debate. And a pluralist liberal democracy can't have an honest discussion of foreign policy if it's controlled, basically by one elite and one idea.

And that's the way things were up until about 10 or 15 years ago. So that's changed and that's good. Second, on a particular issue in which core sense and reason needed to be applied, President Joe Biden made a courageous decision to abandon a losing proposition in Afghanistan. He did it for his own reasons, not because he was pushed domestically, but 60 or 70% of the American people have believed in this policy. They believed in it before he launched the disengagement and they believed in it during the disengagement. They may be unhappy about the video that accompanied the disengagement. They may wish that it was prettier and perhaps had Biden had even more wisdom and more cooperation from the American military, it could have been prettier, it wasn't pretty. But even given it some prettiness, the American people in their wisdom still support the action of their president. This tells me that the American people are ready for restraint. So this is what gives me optimism.

Larry Bernstein:

Barry, thank you. Ken, thank you as well.