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A Sound Principle, but Not a Playbook

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Security First: For a Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy, by Amitai Etzioni, offers a promising effort to transcend the sterile debate between realism and idealism in U.S. foreign policy by arguing that the pursuit of security is a precondition to the longer-term objective of promoting democracy and human rights. Although conceptually appealing as a way to prioritize among potentially competing objectives, the book struggles with thorny problems of implementation that plague real world policy makers, including how to deal with the nuclear threats posed by North Korea and Iran, how to improve counterterrorism cooperation by ambivalent partners like Pakistan and when to intervene in the case of failed states.

Keywords: *American FP; democracy promotion; national interest; intervention; use of force; diplomacy*

In his newest book, *Security First: For A Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy*, Amitai Etzioni takes on a debate that has roiled American foreign policy since the first days of the Republic—how to reconcile America’s commitment to democracy and human rights with a hard-headed pursuit of America’s national interest. The controversy was a central feature of the cold war landscape. It pitted realists like Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger—who favored détente with Russia, reconciliation with Communist China, and support for autocrats like Chile’s General Pinochet in the name of enhancing U.S. security—against critics from the left (Jimmy Carter) and right (Ronald Reagan) who argued for a more principled U.S. approach.

The debate has taken on a new and sharper edge since the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In his second inaugural address, President Bush pushed the prodemocracy argument to a new height with his call for “ending tyranny everywhere” as the core of America’s strategy to combat terrorism (Bush, 2005). But the administration’s own actions belie the lofty rhetoric and underscore the ongoing, practical dilemma. Despite its unequivocal insistence on promoting and supporting democracy, the administration continues to rely on less-than-democratic governments as partners in fighting Islamic extremism, and repudiates elections when the results are not to its liking, as in the case of the Palestinian Authority and Venezuela.

Etzioni’s title foreshadows an answer very different from the Bush Second Inaugural—security first implies democracy later. But Etzioni disavows the realist take on this argument—that the United States should not concern itself with the

internal affairs of others, so long as they support our security agenda. Instead, he proposes a new synthesis, based on the practical judgment that security is a necessary precondition to democracy, and therefore the best way to be a democracy advocate is to put security first. No more agonizing choices, the two heretofore irreconcilable factions are reduced to one grand strategy.

It's hard to quarrel with the proposition that the United States should not waste its time on armed interventions that are destined to fail. Etzioni is right to warn about the poor track record of past efforts to impose democracy at the point of a gun (just think of the Philippines). Indeed, the American public has long questioned, even before the Iraq debacle, the wisdom of democracy promotion as a predicate for intervention.¹ But the key question is whether Etzioni has offered us an alternative framework that is both useful to policy makers in making difficult choices, and can command the respect of the American people.

For Etzioni, security first has a double meaning: First, it means prioritizing issues that are the most threatening to us as the focus of national strategy, and second, in dealing with other countries, it means concentrating on providing security (as opposed to democracy) for those who lack it. The first is a useful, if rather self-evident proposition—focusing on the intersection of terrorism and the danger of nuclear weapons is something most politicians and the public would readily accept. Etzioni sketches out some concrete proposals to address the concerns centering around a deproliferation strategy to deny terrorists weapons of mass destruction, while reducing the current, unpromising emphasis on hardening targets against terrorist attacks.

But while Etzioni identifies some of the key challenges in achieving this goal, he lets many of the hard ones get away. He notes “Pakistan ranks high as a state from which terrorists are likely to be able to obtain ready-made nuclear weapons” (2007, p. 229) and faults the Bush Administration for failing to press the issue because of Pakistani cooperation in the war on terror. Yet he gives no hint what the United States should do about it. Cut off counterterrorism aid? Impose sanctions? Send in special operations forces to snatch A. Q. Khan? Pen a stiff diplomatic note? Similarly, with Iran, he asserts that “an unambiguous declaration by all the nuclear powers must be made that North Korea is the last [nuclear state]. No more such powers will be tolerated” (p. 242). Yet he rejects forceful regime change if diplomacy fails and falls back on the hope that “special bombs” and “special forces” could take out Iran's nuclear sites—the 21st century equivalent of the silver bullet, with neither an assessment of how Iran in turn would respond, including the very plausible likelihood that they would both retaliate and reconstitute their program, nor on the likelihood of blowback in the Arab and Islamic worlds should the United States attack another Muslim state.

To his credit, Etzioni does take on some difficult cases: criticizing the United States–India nuclear deal and United States support for Brazil's uranium-enrichment program because those actions undermine the vital nonproliferation norm. He rejects the notion of a nonproliferation regime based on distinguishing between “good” and “bad” governments, reminding us that sometimes good governments go bad (citing the

case of Venezuela). But even here he doesn't follow his own logic to its conclusion. He defines deproliferation as "preventing new nations from obtaining nuclear bombs and the materials from which they can be made, and using all means available to dislodge them from those who have them, especially failing states" (2007, p. 235). But he fails to explain why the Indias and Brazils of the world should renounce these capabilities, while neither the United States, nor the United Kingdom nor France (nor Japan for that matter) is asked to do so. Moreover, nothing in Etzioni's ambitious—and desirable—deproliferation agenda addresses what steps the current nuclear weapons states need to take to do their part—an obligation they explicitly undertook in Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Etzioni acknowledges the Article VI obligation and blandly observes, "The five [nuclear weapons states] reduced their arsenals, thus arguably living up to the letter of the treaty, but not, many observers hold, to its spirit" (p. 236). In this respect, he lags behind the important new thinking of Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, William Perry, and Sam Nunn, who called for a serious return to a concrete disarmament agenda for the United States and other nuclear weapons states, including by ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, eliminating short-range nuclear weapons, and radically reducing existing stockpiles (Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, & Nunn, 2007).

Etzioni holds up Libya as a model for the security first approach to dealing with rogue states, like Iran, with nuclear ambitions, arguing that the United States should renounce regime change in return for their renouncing the pursuit of nuclear weapons and support for terrorists, irrespective of their human rights records at home. This proposal would sit well with traditional realists, but Etzioni is uncomfortable hanging around in such company. So he tries to slip the noose by asserting,

The deal I suggest—if you deproliferate, and cease supporting terrorism (the Libya formula), I will leave your regime intact—is less bitter than it might initially seem to some. It would not mean the West must engage in some kind of Faustian bargain and give up its liberal soul to purchase security. Regime change is coming in Iran soon enough. (2007, p. 13)

But that prediction makes the problem too easy—after all change hasn't much come in the last 28 years in Iran, just as it hasn't much come in nearly 50 years in Cuba. True, there are good news stories too—we tolerated authoritarian regimes in South Korea and Taiwan to sustain key cold war security partners and today they are vibrant democracies. These two cases support Etzioni's argument for a more gradualist approach to democratization that focuses on building up political, economic and social infrastructure to sustain democracy, but it doesn't ease the dilemma of policy makers in the here and now who are criticized for bunking with very uncomfortable bedfellows.

In its second meaning, Etzioni's proposal does differ in one important way from the realists—he is prepared to intervene actively abroad to provide security where governments are unable to do so. He draws this conclusion from the philosophical

underpinning of security first—the primacy of life. But the problem with his paradigm is that it requires constant line drawing with little guidance as to where those lines should be drawn. He claims that “a Security First approach . . . provides guidance on conditions under which armed humanitarian interventions are justified” (2007, p. 31)—then goes on to assert that this is limited to cases of genocide. But why doesn’t the primacy of life dictate a response when the government is brutally massacring people because they are political opponents (for example, in Haiti, where Etzioni rejects the justification for the 1994 U.S. intervention) or where the government’s policies are leading to millions of deaths, as in North Korea—the prime case Etzioni offers for privileging security over human rights?

Etzioni justifies limiting intervention to preventing genocide out of fear that a broader definition would create a slippery slope toward unconstrained intervention (2007, p. 202). But the result of adopting this approach can already be seen in current practice, where the decision on whether or not to intervene turns on a tortured semantic debate over whether a brutal policy is, or is not, genocide. And in practice, the problem has not been *too much* humanitarian intervention, but *too little*, as the cases of Rwanda and Darfur would suggest. There are powerful, practical constraints that limit the likelihood of interventions without the necessity of imposing too rigid a definition of legitimate intervention. Much better is the definition offered by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, cited but rejected by Etzioni, which accepts intervention in the case of mass killing whether or not there is genocidal intent.

Etzioni’s discussion of the relations between security and liberty both at home and abroad also suffers from the same line-drawing difficulty. On one hand, Etzioni claims that we should “tolerate illiberal ideological regimes as long as the leadership in place helps maintain basic security,” which includes not imposing Shariah with force (2007, p. 30). But in illiberal societies, all law is imposed by the actual or threatened use of force—so why single out Shariah as unacceptable? And what illiberal regime allows the rule of law to flourish? Etzioni wishes away the hard cases, like Egypt, where he counsels the United States to pursue a “top down . . . transition . . . to democracy” (p. 57). Yet the government there is fully embracing his security first paradigm, based on its own assessment of the terrorist threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood, and it is unlikely to decide at the “top” that it should change course without pressure from below. Indeed, many repressive states, from Uzbekistan to China to Russia, justify their actions as needed responses to terrorism (putting security first) and often ally with us in fighting the common enemy of al Qaeda. So who should we partner with (as illiberal moderates), and who is beyond the pale? For Etzioni, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Kuwait are governed according to moderate forms of Islam, so they are okay, as apparently is Syria, because it has religious schools for girls and television programs about polygamy and HIV; but not Saudi Arabia, because it has “vice squads . . . roam[ing] the streets” (p. 150). We should give Putin a bye because, were he to “move . . . significantly in

this direction [“to reverse the numerous undemocratic measures he has introduced”], he endangers his own power and the small amount of stability he has managed to secure for his country” (p. 18).

In the end, *Security First* gives us a framework within which to address the challenges and trade-offs facing policy makers as they struggle to make what Etzioni calls the “second worst choice.” But even a strong paradigm cannot substitute for judgment. Etzioni notes that “the Security First principle does not favor curtailing well-established freedoms for marginal gains in security in London, Paris or New York” (2007, p. 6). Like many of his arguments, in principle this sounds just right, but the policy devil is in the details, as the debate over his book on the Patriot Act and the current controversy about warrantless surveillance so amply demonstrates. *Security First* brings the policy debate back to a more central ground, and if it does not fully provide all the answers, it certainly helps us consider how to think about them.

Note

1. The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations has conducted polls since the 1970s asking respondents quadrennially some version of the question of how important, if at all, “the foreign policy goal of helping to bring a democratic form of government to other nations” should be. In 2002, respondents rated it as 19th on a list of 20 goals, with only 34% saying it was very important (Chicago, 2002).

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