Conference Theme for the 63rd Annual  
Student Conference on United States Affairs (SCUSA 63)  
At the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, 2-5 November 2011

Thinking beyond Boundaries:  
Contemporary Challenges to U.S. Foreign Policy

“The problems we as a nation are grappling with are well-known: steep fiscal imbalances and mounting debt, which could develop into a deep crisis for our country. At the same time, we face a complex and unpredictable international security environment that includes a major war in Afghanistan, winding up the war in Iraq, revolution throughout the Middle East, new rising powers, nuclear proliferation in Iran and Korea, the continued threat of terrorism, and more.”


Introduction
The world faces dramatic, sweeping change amidst uncertainty. Nations are throwing off the chains of autocracy. Human rights and national self-determination have emerged as critical topics of international discourse. Revolutionary changes in computing and information technology appear at a breakneck pace. Economic growth is halting and the prospects for prosperity are hazy. Conflicts over territory, environmental resources, and energy persist. The state monopoly over nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction is a constant concern. After nearly a decade of heavy military spending, the United States is projected to slash its defense budget, raising questions about its influence and future participation in world affairs.

The preceding paragraph could just as easily have been written as the introduction to the first Student Conference on U.S. Affairs in 1949. Many of these conditions would undoubtedly be familiar to delegates attending that first conference. What has changed is that the relationship between these global problems and their potential solutions has grown increasingly complex. New issues and actors rapidly emerge; others recede, only to be revisited again at unexpected times. Despite these changing patterns and varying degrees of attention these issues receive, they share a common thread. It has become increasingly evident over SCUSA’s history that these problems defy any single state’s attempts to solve them. In its first-ever Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, the Department of State recognizes that, “Today’s threats and opportunities are often global, interconnected, and beyond the power of any one state to resolve.”

The theme for SCUSA 63 challenges delegates to consider how best the United States can think and act beyond traditional boundaries. America’s involvement in world affairs can aptly be described as the negotiation of intersecting and overlapping boundaries. These

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boundaries can take physical and ideational forms. Physically, they provide the state with its identity and integrity. Their shape helps to define a state’s available resources, and as a consequence, shape its interests. Ideationally, boundaries connote a more malleable and permeable reality. Diverse forces such as social networks, globalization, and environmental hazards transcend physical boundaries, influencing populations, politics, and policymaking.

By “thinking beyond boundaries,” SCUSA 63 delegates will again grapple with the American response to myriad foreign policy questions. How do these physical and ideational boundaries affect American policymaking, foreign and domestic? What should be America’s role in governance beyond boundaries? Given its halting economic growth following the 2008 recession, should America husband its declining wealth and power? To what extent can America promote legitimate, effective global governance? What form should these efforts at governance take?

This fall, over 150 SCUSA delegates from more than 90 colleges and universities will bring their diverse talents and perspectives to West Point in an effort to gain purchase over these questions. Each roundtable must consider both the roots of the policy problem that face their regions and/or issues, and the ways in which the United States can advance a foreign policy that stretches beyond preconceived boundaries. Much like the first SCUSA over sixty years ago, the discussion and debates over these and other questions will enrich the delegates, roundtable co-chairs, and ultimately, American foreign policy, for years to come.

Boundary-Spanning Problems

America is challenged to devise policy solutions to problems that span multiple boundaries. This is particularly true in an era absent of a singular threat or organizing principle. Competing domestic actors with diverse and conflicting interests may devise not one coherent strategy, but multiple, competing policies. As Walter Russell Meade writes, “Foreign policy doesn’t go away in the absence of strategic consensus; it proliferates.”

As diverse and chaotic as American grand strategy may be, global concerns are equally disparate. Consider climate change and the environment. Devising comprehensive and sustainable approaches to complex problems ranging from pollution abatement to fallout from nuclear accidents requires agreement over the technical and normative aspects of both the problems and solutions. Some states are disproportionately affected by pollution and climate change, compelling them to seek solutions more aggressively than other states. These challenges may influence both domestic and foreign policies. Consensus between states can easily fracture at multiple breakpoints: wealthy states versus poor; autocratic versus democratic; substance economies versus information-based ones. Multi-national corporations play a critical role in influencing state behavior through domestic political activity, favoring one component of a

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broader policy over another. Policy entrepreneurs are also especially influential in organizing
attention and calling for new initiatives, though not always as states may like. The competition
for resources can also drive state action.

International institutions may offer some promise in reducing conflict and promoting
cooperation. At their best, they promote transparency and enhance information sharing between
states while enhancing opportunities for collective action. Yet the failures of these institutions
are also well documented. International institutions are difficult to create and maintain, and
equally difficult to change/reform; their efficacy is at times questionable. Robert Keohane and
David Victor note that these regimes “Should be viewed not as ideal constructions but outcomes
that emerge from real-world political, organizational, and information constraints.” Further,
regimes may represent multiple components of a broader understanding of a policy. In the
example above, environmental policy may have components related to agriculture, water, public
health, and manufacturing policies. Privileging one component over another may impact policy
outcomes in unpredictable ways.

This brief discussion of boundary-spanning problems and their solutions raises several
questions for SCUSA delegates. How can the United States promote collective action given the
limitations of an uncoordinated international system? When it comes to advancing its interests,
does “might make right”? When do the needs of one state or region become more pressing than
those of another? Can America realize its foreign policy goals through existing international
regimes and institutions, as currently conceived and constructed, or is a different approach
necessary?

Transnational Issues: Local and Regional Roots; Global Impacts

SCUSA 63 takes a unique approach in organizing roundtables to discuss boundary-
spanning problems. Many of the boundary-spanning issues that America faces have regional and
local roots but global impacts. The delegates’ charge is to consider not only the immediate triage
necessary to react to an international crisis, but to propose broader policy solutions. The
revolutions throughout the greater Middle East, known as the Arab Spring, are an example of
this trend. Although many of the causes for the revolts are local in nature, their impacts are
cross-border and global. The Arab Spring illustrates the state’s inability to prevent ideas from penetrating
its boundaries. The Internet and the nearly limitless proliferation of social media circumvent
many barriers to social change. Yet the impact of these changes affects policies worldwide.
The American response was to encourage self-determination and democratization; The Chinese
approach was to reject such changes just as strongly. How should the United States devise its

6 For a more thorough critique of institutionalism see John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International
8 For a deeper exploration of component-driven policy and regime politics, see Ashley E. Jochim and Peter J. May,
foreign policy in light of these dynamics? Should America vocally encourage democracy while its chief trade partner and global competitor takes the opposite approach?

Each of SCUSA 63’s roundtables examines a similar marriage of region and policy problem, while encouraging delegates to think beyond the geographic boundaries that typify American foreign policy. In the Americas, immigration, drug trafficking, and border security are challenges to the United States, Border States (i.e., California, Arizona, and Texas), and interstate relations with Mexico. Yet crime and drug trafficking alone do not define American policy in the western hemisphere; President Obama’s recent trip to Brazil highlighted the critical role the region plays in America’s economic future. How should the United States advance its security interests and improve its access to South- and Latin American markets and resources? What are the prospects for future relations between the United States and its rapidly growing neighbors to the south?

In Africa, international aid and development organizations work to solve complex problems falling under the broad rubric of human security. There is considerable debate over how to solve problems and the role that foreign aid plays in promoting or stunting the growth of governing capacity. The inability of many African states to provide basic services and infrastructure discourages foreign investment from western states, making an escape from poverty exceedingly difficult. Basic sanitation and health conditions further detract from potential investment. Aid and development efforts may enhance dependency rather than build self-sufficiency. Chinese investment in Africa, which does not mirror western practices, confounds international efforts that emphasize transparency and accountability; they are primarily (though not exclusively) concerned with resource extraction. How can the United States best act to improve human security in Africa? Is there a better way to promote development and limit dependency while improving governance?

Old Allies and New Challenges: Europe, Asia, and Boundary-Spanning problems

On the surface, European concerns seem completely independent of African, Asian, and American ones. Yet many related challenges loom. Once hailed as a model of supranational institutionalism, Europe is at a crossroads. The maintenance and, arguably, the very survival of the European Union and the Euro zone are inextricably linked to the issues of debt, demographics, and immigration. As Europeans age, questions arise as to how European countries can sustain economic growth and prosperity without lowering the barriers to permanent immigration. At the same time, European prosperity is being eroded by debt. The Eurozone’s

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15 For insights into the way that regional institutions can be subsumed within (rather than replace) domestic ones, see James A. Caporaso and Sidney Tarrow, "Polanyi in Brussels: Supranational Institutions and the Transnational Embedding of Markets," *International Organization* 63, no. 4 (2009), 593-620.
recent financial bailouts of Greece and Portugal illustrate the challenges caused by the increased interdependence associated with a common currency. Austerity measures implemented throughout the Euro zone may create conditions where the welfare states in Europe may not be able to support increasingly graying populations. Refugees from recently democratizing North African countries exacerbate these problems. All of these conditions lead to questions about the viability of the European monetary union and of the European Union more broadly. Are the institutions and norms strong enough to survive these challenges? What do the fiscal, monetary, and demographic challenges mean for European participation in transnational economic and security arrangements with the United States?

Transnational competition and interdependence present challenges and opportunities for American foreign policy in Asia. As Robert Kaplan writes that, “A non-Western world of astonishing interdependence and yet fiercely guarded sovereignty, with militaries growing alongside economies, is being tensely woven in the Greater Indian Ocean,” China, India, and other states compete for natural resources and market share in the West. Technological advances and market liberalization continue to benefit the region. But are these gains sustainable? What is the impact of changing demographic trends in China on its foreign policy? How quickly should America withdraw from Afghanistan – and what are the consequences of our departure? Can tensions between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan be resolved peacefully? How should the United States conduct its foreign policy in Asia to best promote security and prosperity?

Some international issues defy regional alignment and require a broader global commitment to solve. Osama bin Laden is gone, yet al Qaeda persists, even in the twilight of the Arab Spring. Proliferation of offensive nuclear technology remains a critical threat to the United States and its allies. Technological innovations such as cloud computing promise the benefits of increased access to data. However, these gains must be balanced against the potential risk to security and threat to privacy. Efforts to achieve global consensus on regulating, taxing, and securing access to the Internet have not generated consensus. These critical issues lead to a variety of questions that SCUSA delegates must consider. How should the United States deal with the scourge of terrorism in a post-bin Laden world? What are America’s interests and role in governing cyberspace? Can the United States create broad enough partnerships to achieve its policy objectives while recognizing and integrating the nuanced perspectives of other states?

All Politics Isn’t Local: Considering American Domestic Policy beyond Boundaries

American foreign policymaking is rooted in a complex web of governance arrangements that accentuate a variety of actors, institutions, and interests. Even during the Cold War, American domestic politics did not stop at the water’s edge. American cities and states have

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19 For a detailed discussion on this trend, see Julian E. Zelizer, Arsenal of democracy: the politics of national security-- from World War II to the War on Terrorism (New York, NY: Basic Books 2010).
interests that may be orthogonal to those of the United States as a whole. California’s emission standards eclipse federal ones; Arizona seeks tighter immigration policies; New York City regulates health standards more stringently than the Food and Drug Administration. How do these diverse interests at different levels of government impact American foreign policymaking? What responsibility do cities, states, and the national government have in seeking the benefits of economic globalization whilemitigating its negative consequences? These diverse domestic interests should inform SCUSA delegates’ views on the use and effects of American economic might abroad. Arguably, through its trade practices and human rights norms, the United States helps to set standards for the rest of the world. This is true across a broad range of policy areas, from environmental protection to labor practices. How best can American economic and trade policy be used to bring about desirable outcomes at home and abroad?

American Military Power: In what forms, and for what uses?

In the wake of the troop surge in Iraq, Secretary Gates articulated the need for the United States to develop a new vision for the American military. Gates noted that the Department of Defense must carefully balance the needs of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan with preparations for future conflicts. These comments were prescient. The American military faces questions as to its long-term sustainability. In light of pending budget cuts, the endgame in Iraq, and an uncertain role in Afghanistan, the American military is at a crossroads of its own. The military’s improving competence at fighting small wars and conducting counterinsurgency demonstrates its ability to learn and adapt to changing conditions on the battlefield. Recognizing that not all future wars will be conducted with the same aims and against threats similar to the current ones, the military is working to improve its ability to fight under myriad conditions. But does this push for “Full Spectrum Warfare” mean that the hard-learned lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan will be quickly dismissed? Of equal concern may be the development of a new American way of war(fare), hardwired to COIN at the cost of readiness to meet and defeat more traditional threats. How can the United States achieve its interests in the face of tremendous fiscal pressure to reduce its global commitments?

Questions about the military’s form are outgrowths of broader questions of civil-military relations. There is an inexorable link between the military’s ends and means and the desires of the republic that the military serves. After a decade of persistent conflict, it is unclear if that link is as tightly coupled as it has been in the past. The outgoing Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, has noted the increasingly disconnected nature of the American military from the society that it serves. Of the American people, Mullen recently stated, “But I fear they do not know us. I fear they do not comprehend the full weight of the burden we carry. Of equal concern may be the development of a new American way of war(fare), hardwired to COIN at the cost of readiness to meet and defeat more traditional threats. How can the United States achieve its interests in the face of tremendous fiscal pressure to reduce its global commitments?

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or the price we pay when we return from battle.”24 Can a stronger link be forged between those who develop and implement American grand strategy and its electorate? What is the military’s role in American society more broadly? How can America better bridge the civil-military divide?

Conclusion: Contemporary Challenges and Enduring Debates

In the most recent edition of the National Security Strategy of the United States, President Barack Obama noted the importance of recognizing the international nature of American national security problems. He writes:

We are clear-eyed about the challenge of mobilizing collective action, and the shortfalls of the international system. But America has not succeeded by stepping outside the currents of international cooperation. We have succeeded by steering those currents in the direction of liberty and justice – so that nations thrive by meeting their responsibilities and facing consequences when they don’t.25

With President Obama’s insights in mind, this paper has thrown down a gauntlet for delegates attending SCUSA 63. What should American foreign policy look like in light of the boundary-spanning nature of the problems we face? How should we address localized issues that have global consequences? What is the role of the United States, and other nations, in addressing contemporary global challenges? SCUSA 63 delegates are encouraged to contribute their talents, insights, and energy to addressing these enduring debates.

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