

Smart Talk  
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**Presenter**

Marshall Bouton

**Moderator**

Sook-Jong Lee

**Discussants**

Sang-Yoon Ma  
Nae-young Lee  
Woojin Lee  
Sunggho Sheen  
Byoung-Kwon Sohn  
Okyeon Yi

This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Talk.

The East Asia Institute  
909 Sampoong B/D  
310-68 Euljiro 4-ga  
Jung-gu  
Seoul 100-786  
Republic of Korea

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## Constrained Internationalism: How Americans View the World in 2010

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Following the Global Financial Crisis, two lengthy wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the inauguration of a new administration, the American public's outlook on the world in 2010 is at a critical juncture. For the past sixty or more years of internationalism, the United States has maintained a major hegemonic presence. Particularly, the high point or "golden age" of U.S. power has been the post-Cold War period, in which it was dominant and remained unchallenged for the best part of two decades. However, recent trends have shown the United States is in relative decline as it reels from the effects of the financial crisis and two exhaustive wars. The rise of China and other emerging powers has further compounded its decline.

The Global Crisis and the subsequent recession are taking its toll on the American people, who in the recent mid-term elections expressed their frustration and constraint over the ongoing economic problems at home. To what extent has American opinion changed toward its nation's foreign policy while the public recognizes its declining influence? In light of costly wars abroad and economic turmoil at home, are we seeing signs of growing isolationism?

Every two years, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA) has undertaken the *Global Views* survey to assess the American public's opinion toward U.S. foreign policy issues. To explain more on the CCGA's *Global Views 2010* survey and its implications, the EAI invited Marshall Bouton (President,

CCGA) to talk about its findings with South Korean experts on foreign policy. Bouton gave an overview of the survey, exploring the results and outlining the policy implications. Considering all that has happened in the last two years, Bouton hypothesized that they expected the results to show that there would be incipient isolationism among the American people toward U.S. foreign policy. The results, though, showed a complex picture in which the public were not interested in isolationism yet wished for a more selective foreign policy. In general, the survey revealed that they have a strong grasp of international affairs.

The following is a summary of the presentation by Marshall Bouton and the subsequent discussion among the experts and Bouton.

### Presentation

#### ***Relative U.S. Decline but Support for International Commitments***

The picture painted by *Global Views 2010* is of an American public amply aware of the relatively declining position of the United States in the world today.<sup>1</sup> They see an international landscape that is in change, becoming more multipolar and less dependent on the United States. At a time of great economic strain, this is in some ways welcomed by Americans. Evidently, the influence of the United States still ranks at the top among other surveyed coun-

*“Answering a direct question on whether the United States should take on an active part in world affairs, support has remained steady at 67 percent.”*

tries. Yet, these numbers are declining in comparison with previous years and by 2020 U.S. influence is projected to be equal with China. It is important to note that in this survey the decline of U.S. influence began in 2008, with the financial crisis.

Possibly the greatest indicator of the perceived decline in U.S. global power is the survey on Washington’s role as a world leader. This asked the question of the percentage who thinks the United States plays a stronger role in the world compared to ten years ago. Only 24 percent felt that way, down from a high of 55 percent in 2002. It is currently at the lowest point since the survey was first conducted in the early 1970s.

Emphasizing these perceptions is the view that American power is increasingly constrained in international affairs. The outlook on the U.S. ability to achieve its foreign policy goals is fairly pessimistic, with 53 percent believing that its ability to achieve foreign policy goals has declined over the last few years. This may strongly relate to the threat of terrorism to which Americans do not feel any safer from. In the survey, 50 percent felt that the ability of terrorists to launch an attack against the United States is the same as the time of 9/11.

Despite these results, Bouton explained that contrary to expectations, the American public does not support isolationism and turned to further data to prove this point. Figures from *Global Views 2010* show that Americans continue to support U.S. global commitments. Answering a direct question on whether the United States should take on an active part in world affairs, support has remained steady at 67 percent.

Respondents have also taken favorable views toward support for international treaties, maintaining a superior military power, and operating military bases in other countries.

Participation in international organizations such as the United Nations and commitments to alliances all remain positive.

Furthermore, asked about the U.S. role in solving problems overseas, a strong 71 percent was in favor of the United States playing its part with other countries. Along with this favorable response to multilateral commitments, it highlights how the American public feels that U.S. power should be expressed differently.

### ***A Preference for Selective Engagement***

At the heart of the respondents’ views on U.S. foreign policy is a preference for selective engagement. Bouton categorized this approach into five core principles: defending only vital interests; participate in low-risk and low-cost humanitarian missions, pursue multilateral actions through the United Nations, maintain a lighter U.S. military footprint, and stay on the sidelines of conflicts that do not directly affect the United States.

This preference means becoming involved abroad only when threats endanger U.S. vital interests. In identifying these kinds of major threats, Americans show strong support for actions against terrorism and WMDs. In the survey, preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and combating international terrorism brought about a strong response, 73 and 69 percent respectively regard them as very important foreign policy goals. The responses to the case of Iran’s disputed nuclear program are an interesting example of selective engagement. Since there is a divide over whether to use military force, diplomacy and economic sanctions are more favored. In an alternative scenario, were Israel to go to war with Iran over its nuclear program, a majority of 56 percent would not support the United States be-

*“In spite of the preference for selective engagement, the American public continues to favor building up relations with its traditional allies in the Asia region.”*

coming militarily involved in such a conflict. This shows the way in which the American public does not wish to become embroiled in the conflict of other nations.

### ***U.S. Policy in Asia: the Good News Story***

In spite of the preference for selective engagement, the American public continues to favor building up relations with its traditional allies in the Asia region. There is also a cautious acceptance of China’s rise, which at this stage is not seen as threatening; only 46 percent are somewhat worried that China will be a future military threat. Recognition of China’s position is partly connected with the acceptance of less dominance by the United States relative to the rise of other powers.

When asked how to deal with the rise of China, a majority of 68 percent believed the United States should undertake friendly cooperation and engagement, with only 28 percent supporting active measures to limit the growth of China’s power. From this result, it can be seen that there is little support for a containment policy against Beijing. This is further supported by the fact that Americans now view China as more important to the vital interests of the United States than Japan. It also ranks at the top of a list of the most important countries to the United States which had long been dominated by Britain and Canada. In line with China’s importance, there is growing opposition to the use of U.S. troops were there to be any conflict between China and Taiwan. A strong majority of 71 percent are against any involvement, reflecting the favored selective engagement of keeping out of the conflicts of other countries.

Bouton summarized that this positive yet cautious view of China shows us two characteristic about the American public’s percep-

tion of China. Firstly, Americans finally understand China’s rise, secondly, they are no longer worried about this ascent.

Considering the lack of achievements elsewhere in the world and the poor economic situation at home, the success and stability in Asia represents something positive in its overall policy. With this optimistic assessment of Washington’s policy, the American public’s support for its alliances in Asia is strong. South Korea in particular is at the top of a list of overseas military bases that should continue to be maintained; 62 percent are in favor. However, approaches to the Korean Peninsula reflect the broader feelings toward U.S. foreign policy and selective engagement. Responses to the sinking of the *Cheonan*, a South Korean Navy corvette, by North Korea in March, 2010 reveals that 67 percent of respondents believe that although the United States should criticize North Korea, it should view the incident as one of many between the two Koreas. Another question on the use of U.S. forces to defend South Korea reveals that 56 percent oppose the use of U.S. troops if North Korea attacked South Korea; however this changes to 61 percent in favor if it is a UN-sponsored effort. As Victor Cha highlighted in a report assessing *Global Views 2010*, were North Korea to attack the South, the U.S. effort would automatically come under UN mandate anyway. Therefore, in the event of any future contingency this aspect must be made clear to the American public.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Discussion**

#### ***American Threat Perceptions: Counter-proliferation or Counter-terrorism?***

In response to questions about the main threats to the United States, the American

*“The desire to lessen the role of the United States abroad and the willingness of the Obama administration to pursue a more proactive policy are not counter to each other.”*

public ranked proliferation of WMDs and terrorism as the top threats. When asked about the main global threats, 68 percent considered Iran’s nuclear program as “critical,” while 55 percent considered violent Islamist groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan as “critical.” One discussant wanted to know why Iran’s nuclear program or nuclear proliferation in general ranked higher than violent extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In spite of the terrorist threat that Americans feel immediately, stopping nuclear proliferation is considered a top priority. The discussant wanted to know how the public perceived international threats and policy priorities.

Marshall Bouton stressed that for Americans, the two threats are the same. Preventing the proliferation of WMDs has been a top foreign policy priority for almost sixty years; terrorism is just a new dimension to that effort. The ultimate nightmare scenario for Americans is for WMDs to fall into the hands of terrorists who would then use them against the United States. Since there is a high potential for terrorists to receive WMDs from hostile or unstable regimes, preventing unfriendly regimes or failing states from possessing these weapons in the first place remains a top priority in the eyes of Americans.

He also elaborated on why Iran’s nuclear program and not terrorist groups in Afghanistan or Pakistan rank higher. Iran in this case has history and there are several reasons why it is perceived as such a threat. Firstly, Washington has not maintained diplomatic relations with Tehran for more than thirty years. When it did have diplomatic relations, they were severed in traumatic fashion by the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and subsequent hostage crisis that dragged on for more than a year after the botched U.S. rescue attempt. This was considered in America to be one of

the greatest foreign policy disasters in post-World War II history. Iran is also headed by what Americans regard to be an odious regime. Furthermore, it is considered a threat to its neighbors, has links to terrorist groups, and there are unpredictable elements within the state. This all combines to make Tehran’s nuclear program an immediate high foreign policy priority.

### ***Selective Engagement and the Obama administration***

The discussion focused on Americans’ preference for more selective engagement in its foreign policy priorities. Despite this new emphasis toward its foreign policy, some of the discussants felt that it differed from the Obama administration’s current foreign policy of proactive engagement with other countries, particularly in Asia.

The desire to lessen the role of the United States abroad and the willingness of the Obama administration to pursue a more proactive policy are not counter to each other. Bouton pointed out that lessening in this case does not mean the United States does not want to play a role anymore. What the results from *Global Views 2010* say about the American people is that they now recognize their position in the world. There is an acceptance that U.S. dominance in the global economy and military power is no longer a fact. Dominance and influence will no longer be a birth right and America will now have to work to maintain its position. The Obama administration efforts to actively engage the world reflects this new reality. Since his inauguration, President Obama has been seeking build relations and partnerships in order to achieve U.S. goals more effectively. Selective engagement in this respect is actively engaging parts of the

*“Touring Asia is part of an effort to show the successful side to his policies and seek to rebuild some of his lost ground in the domestic political arena.”*

world where there has been much success in U.S. foreign policy. While at the same time, it is limiting engagement in parts of the world which are fraught with foreign policy failures and difficulties, such as the Middle East.

When looking at achieving those goals, one discussant pointed out that selective engagement is very difficult in the current globalized world with transnational threats that are not specific to a particular geographic location. Therefore, in what ways can the United States be selective in dealing with threats such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation that cross borders?

Selective engagement does not mean becoming less active in dealing with challenges. Bouton pointed to the statistics on how to deal with terrorism as indicator of when it comes to direct threats, the American public is willing to use tough measures across the board. Respondents answered strongly in favor of a number of active measures against terrorists: 81 percent support airstrikes on terrorist training camps, 73 percent support assassination of terrorist leaders, and even 43 percent support the use of torture to extract information from terrorists.

Bouton stressed that he wanted to differentiate between selective engagement in terms of how many different threats Americans want to prioritize versus selective in addressing the threat that have been prioritized. The ongoing dispute over Iran’s nuclear program is a good example. In general, there is strong opposition to Iran possessing nuclear weapons (as mentioned before 68 percent view it as a critical threat), but there is also hesitation over whether to use military force to stop it. Only 18 percent of respondents would support military strikes against Iran’s nuclear facilities to prevent it from developing nuclear weapons. However, this number

jumps to 47% were diplomatic efforts to fail in putting a halt to Iran’s nuclear program.

### ***Expected Outcome? The U.S. Mid-Term Elections***

With the recent mid-term elections in the United States, some of the participants were interested to know how those elections relay some of the findings from the *Global Views 2010* survey. To what extent is the changing mood of the American people, as seen through the approach toward foreign policy issues, reflected in the elections results that were considered to be a heavy blow for President Obama?

Bouton stressed that the main concern for voters in this election was the economy. This is actually manifested in the *Global Views 2010* survey where economic issues dominate responses. In a question on what is more important for the American public, an overwhelming 90 percent stated that fixing problems at home was more important than addressing challenges from abroad. Those who were casting their votes in the mid-term elections were only expressing frustration at the ongoing economic difficulties. Following such a defeat for his party, President Obama continued with his Asia trip. Considering that in the past he has canceled overseas trips whenever domestic priorities have come up, the context of this trip is different. Touring Asia is part of an effort to show the successful side to his policies and seek to rebuild some of his lost ground in the domestic political arena.

The discussion also turned to the issue of the relationship between the public and the administration over foreign policy issues. For example, the public favors negotiations to deal with North Korea, yet the Obama administration is becoming increasingly frustrated with

the North and is not willing to negotiate yet. Bouton stated that it is important to understand that favoring negotiations is a general preference among the public and administration when dealing with foreign policy challenges, such as North Korea. It is often an issue of salience as foreign policy issues tend to be low down the list of priorities for both the public and the politicians. Whenever assessing U.S. foreign policy and its interaction with the public, it is important to place it within this domestic context.■

——— Marshall Bouton is President of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

### Discussants

Sang-Yoon Ma

- Catholic University of Korea

Nae-Young Lee

- Korea University

Woojin Lee

- Korea University

Sungho Sheen

- Seoul National University

Byoung-Kwon Sohn

- Chung-Ang University

Okyeon Yi

- Seoul National University

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup> The Chicago Council on Global Affairs  
*Global Views 2010*

[http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/POS\\_Topline%20Reports/POS%202010/Global%20Views%202010.pdf](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/POS_Topline%20Reports/POS%202010/Global%20Views%202010.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> P 7, Victor D. Cha and Katrin Katz “Report

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on U.S. Attitudes toward the Republic of Korea” September 2010, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs,

[http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/POS\\_Topline%20Reports/POS%202010/Global%20Views%202010%20-%20Korea%20Report.pdf](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/POS_Topline%20Reports/POS%202010/Global%20Views%202010%20-%20Korea%20Report.pdf)