

The Changing International System¹ Implications for U.S. National Security

OLLI Lecture

Church of the Good Shepherd

19 March 2012

This lecture will provide a brief history of how the international system has evolved over the past hundred years as we have moved from the classic balance-of-power system to a more integrated, interdependent global system. National security is too often defined in terms of military power. General Johns will challenge this focus and place military power in the context of other elements of power, especially economic power. He will also focus on what may be the most critical element of national power: National Will and Cohesion. Without this condition, the other elements of power cannot be harnessed.

Against this background, General Johns will give his version of “The State of the Union.” He will give his views on how the United States can best adjust to the evolving system to avoid providing another chapter to Paul Kennedy’s book, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers.” The following outline provides the main points of the lecture:

1. **International system in flux, outcome uncertain.**
 - A. Movement from balance-of power system to global interdependence; systemic/structural changes.
 - B. History of mankind is toward larger political organizations.
 - C. Evolution toward centralized authority is always resisted; unilateralism/go-it-alone appeals to voters. A president states “we are an empire and we define reality,” and his VP proclaims that we don’t need to ask the permission of the United Nations to defend our interests.
 - D. The U.S. is still struggling to create a “more perfect union” internally while facing the task of adapting to a “more perfect union” of the international system.
 - E. Other countries, and Europe, are facing the same dilemma.
2. **National security and elements of power:**
 - A. Military.
 - B. Economic.
 - C. Political.
 - D. Moral Suasion.
 - E. National Will and Cohesion.
3. **Military:**
 - A. WWII left U.S. dominant. This led to an ethos of “American Militarism.”
 - B. Belief in “Total Victory” a la unconditional surrender in WWII. Korea outcome; VN, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc. hard to accept.

¹ For those who want to go into more depth on my thoughts on this subject, I have placed three readings on the OLLI website for this session. On foreign policy, see [U.S. Foreign Policy and Military Interventions](#). On economic problems, see [2012 Election: Show Down at the OK Corral](#). The third essay, [National Will](#), summarizes the factors that determine the cohesion in a society.

- C. COIN: Mission impossible. Terrorism as “War of ideas,” the side that has the moral high ground has the advantage.
- D. World policeman? Peace dividend in 1992
- E. Where is the threat?
- F. Current National Military Strategy.

4. **Economic:**

- A. At the end of WWII, the U.S. had the only strong economic infrastructure and we were the sole super power. We dictated the terms of the world economic system. The Bretton Woods agreement established our currency as the world standard; the World Bank and International Monetary Fund were crafted to fit our economic theory, and we dominated the global economy for several decades.
- B. Our control has eroded; the “coordinating body of the leading economic actors now numbers 20 (G-20).
- C. 2008 NIE conclusion: Economic conditions, not terrorism, are the greatest threat to our national security.
- D. Debt and debt throughout the world in a global economy is a sword hanging over the necks of all countries. It almost led to a world-wide depression and we are not out of the woods yet.
- E. The public in all countries demands services and low taxes; these are incompatible demands. The free lunches went on for 30 years in the U.S. It is now time to bite the bullet.
- F. Politicians cannot level with the voters regarding the sacrifices that must be made and expect to be elected.
- G. Voters don’t understand the problem. Many don’t even know the difference between the national deficit and the national debt.
- H. The conflicting solutions offered by the competing ideologies (Keynesian v. Classical Economic theories) are beyond the grasp of most voters; they respond to simple bumper-sticker solutions that promise economic prosperity with little pain.
- I. 2012 election *should be a choice on how to cope with the changing world environment and how best to meet our challenges!* There is abundant evidence that voters don’t understand the issues; rather, they vote on personality and other factors..
- J. Eventual train wreck?

5. **Political: Ultimate Problem**

- A. Jim Fallows: The system is broken; unless we fix it, we will have a new constitution or a coup.
- B. Political gridlock.
- C. Wilsonian Idealism: Our political and economic systems are appropriate for the entire world.
- D. Arab Spring?
- E. Role of UN, IMF, WTO, World Bank.
- F. American “Exceptionalism”. When various countries proclaim that they are “exceptional,” there is little room for compromise on political, economic, and military conflict

6. **Moral:**

- A. In domestic affairs, do we favor a community approach, or individual responsibility for one’s welfare?

- B. In international affairs, what is the role of morality? World standing. If the “War on Terrorism” is in fact a war of ideas, are we winning or losing?
- 7. **National Will and Cohesion:** (Willingness to sacrifice for the common good). There are five major factors that determine cohesion:
 - A. Tradition. Common values, homogeneity of religion, ethnicity, language.
 - B. Trend of recent experience.
 - C. Crises. External and Internal; need for “clear and present danger.”
 - D. Equity. This is not *equality*; rather, it is a sense of *fairness*. Class warfare and Occupy Wall Street are about this factor.
 - E. Trust and confidence in leadership and institutions. When the public does not trust its leaders and its institutions, it is difficult to elicit sacrifice for the common good. What do the polls show about this factor?

Conclusions (State of the Nation):

- A. We are in uncharted waters; volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity cloud the nature of the problems we face and the appropriate solutions.
- B. Democracy reflects will of the people, but they must know what they want. “Throw the rascals out” is not good enough. Anger and hate without solutions is a dead end.
- C. Leaders must understand the systems (economic, political, military—at all levels).
- D. We are a **Republic**; leaders must decide what is best for the country, not what gets them re-elected.
- E. Do our Constitution and the political system it requires meet the challenge?