Ideas and People

**An Interview with Richard N. Haass,
President, Council on Foreign Relations**

Richard N. Haass

EDITORS' NOTE *Dr. Richard Haass is in his 13th year in his current role. In 2013, he served as the chair of the multiparty negotiations in Northern Ireland that provided the foundation for the 2014 Stormont House Agreement. For his efforts to promote peace and conflict resolution, he received the 2013 Tipperary International Peace Award. From January 2001 to June 2003, Dr. Haass was Director of Policy Planning for the Department of State, where he was a principal adviser to Secretary of State Colin Powell. Confirmed by the U.S. Senate to hold the rank of Ambassador, Dr. Haass also served as U.S. coordinator for policy toward the future of Afghanistan and U.S. envoy to the Northern Ireland peace process. In recognition of his service, he received the State Department's Distinguished Honor Award. From 1989 to 1993, he was Special Assistant to President George H.W. Bush and Senior Director for Near East and South Asian affairs on the staff of the National Security Council. In 1991, Dr. Haass was awarded the Presidential Citizens Medal for his contributions to the development and articulation of U.S. policy during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Previously, he served in the Departments of State (1981-85) and Defense (1979-80), and was a legislative aide in the U.S. Senate. Dr. Haass also was Vice President and Director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution, the Sol M. Linowitz Visiting Professor of International Studies at Hamilton College, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a lecturer in public policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, and a research associate at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. A Rhodes scholar, Dr. Haass holds a B.A. from Oberlin College, and Master and Doctor of Philosophy degrees from Oxford University. He has also received numerous honorary degrees. Dr. Haass is the author or editor of 12 books on American foreign policy and one book on management.*

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *Council on Foreign Relations (cfr.org) is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization, think tank, and publisher dedicated to being a resource to help people better understand the world and the foreign policy choices facing the United States and other countries.*

Has the mission for the Council on Foreign Relations changed or evolved, and how do you describe it today?

The mission has remained pretty consistent even though the ways it has been implemented have changed over the course of the 94 years we've been in business.

The mission is to be a resource and a source of ideas, and to provide analysis and background to help people understand the world and the choices that the United States needs to make.

We do that for our individual and corporate members, and for government leaders, Congressmen, and journalists. In recent years, we started doing it more for the public through websites. We have also now made a major commitment to the world of education in providing this for high school and college students, as well as graduate students.

We attempt to decipher and explain this complicated world to help people get a better grasp on some of the trade offs and considerations that are involved in various foreign policy choices.

Is it challenging to not take a point of view?

Here I distinguish between the institution and the individuals who are part of it. The institution doesn't have a collective point of view; the Council on Foreign Relations itself doesn't take a stance. We're scrupulous about being nonpartisan and independent, and not accepting resources from governments including our own.

But individuals take positions all the time. Every article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, which we publish, is written by an author with a point of view. Every speaker who comes to talk at the hundreds of meetings we have has a point of view. We have 80 or so full- or part-time scholars and each of them has a point of view they express in their books or articles or blogs.

But it's important to keep the distinction between the individual and the institution because one of the real strengths of the institution is that people feel they can come here and get a fair hearing.

Have you had to broaden the range of topics you focus on?

It has become dramatically broader in the relatively short span of time that I've been here.

We now have three people working full-time on global health issues related to both infectious and noninfectious disease. We have five people working on cyber-related issues and two people working on climate-related issues. We have several people working on the domestic dimension of national security covering topics like education, immigration, and infrastructure; and we have far more people than ever before working on economic issues.

This reflects the fact that global issues have become much more pronounced and that any dividing line between what is "domestic" and "foreign" or "international" is artificial.

We now cover a lot more issues, many that overlap.

We have a center named for Hank Greenberg. It is a geoeconomic center dealing with issues like energy or climate where we can't separate the economics from the strategic.

Do things feel different today despite the various ebbs and flows you've witnessed historically?

It does. Today, the ability to exert power and have influence is in more hands than ever before. We've come a long way from a world in which we could talk about a couple of great powers that could determine the fate of the world.

Among the players now are groups like Doctors Without Borders or the Gates Foundation, which can play a major role.

The Middle East now has groups like ISIS and other non-state actors involved.

On top of this distribution of capacity, we're also seeing a decentralization of decision-making with more players getting up in the morning and not deferring to Washington, but taking matters into their own hands.

This is a much less centralized world and, as a result, it's a far more difficult world to organize and keep orderly.

Is the U.S. still a leader in this type of world?

One of the prevailing views is that, in some ways, we've entered a post-American world. The U.S. is still the most powerful country in the world but there is a clear perception that the U.S. had made the strategic decision to limit its involvement, particularly in the Middle East.

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People point out decisions such as not getting involved in areas like Syria where certain redlines were crossed, and at other moments when troops were withdrawn.

It's not a question of all or nothing. The U.S. is still very influential and it is still involved in every aspect of international relations. However, all things being equal, it's fair to say that both for structural reasons and political reasons, the U.S. is less willing and able to play a leadership role. It has become more difficult externally but there is also a lack of political and intellectual consensus at home about the U.S. role in the world. There is a real lack of consensus about how many calories the U.S. ought to be devoting to things international, and there is no consensus about its purposes in the Middle East, or anywhere else for that matter.

After Iraq and Afghanistan, there is a degree of exhaustion, so there is a strong sense that the U.S. counts for less than it used to. Is this permanent? To the extent that it's caused by structural phenomena, yes, but to the extent that it's caused by choice and a consensus, it's not permanent, and future administrations will have to determine their relationship with the world.

What is required of a great leader today?

I worry about the divides within the parties and I worry about the divides between the parties. People are always asking me how we can fix this. One of the answers is leadership, though I would argue it is more difficult to exert effective leadership in the political space than it has ever been because of the weakness of parties and lack of party discipline. Also, politics today can be funded from so many directions.

The media, which used to build community, has become so splintered that it actually works against community and consensus.

Some people say crises will create consensus but we've had a lot of crises lately and I haven't seen consensus come about as a result. Increasingly, it seems that when we have a crisis, there is continuous debate over what policies should be embraced.

One of the principal considerations for 21st century American foreign policy is going to be the U.S. relationship with China.

Is the media still serving the right role?

It's harder and harder to speak about media. We have network television, cable, and social media, and now we have people who self-select and often choose media that only reflects and reinforces their own preferences.

So media is no longer a centralizing force for society. I also think that, for a lot of the digital media in particular, there are no gatekeepers or widely accepted standards. Opinion is now on the "news" pages. There is selection bias. Increasingly, the media has an ideological dimension, which means it can't be consistent and hold people's feet to the fire equally.

What do you consider to be the most important issues we face today?

One of the principal considerations for 21st century American foreign policy is going to be the U.S. relationship with China, and trying not to have that relationship deteriorate into a new Cold War. The ability to maintain significant areas of cooperation amidst the inevitable competition will dramatically affect the trajectory of this next chapter of history.

A top issue is preventing the spread and use of nuclear weapons. We should aim to cap or better yet roll back the North Korea and Iran nuclear programs; we must also work to discourage Iran's neighbors from following suit. And we must seek to prevent a nuclear event involving Pakistan and India.

After that, some would say climate change or coming up with the rules to govern cyberspace are the main issues. Still others might say it is avoiding a global pandemic that could cost hundreds of millions of lives; others might say it is doing something about an unraveling Middle East.

It comes back to whether this world is somehow qualitatively different and, in some ways, worse than it has been before. Indirectly, the answer is yes. The reason there are now so many global, regional, and bilateral challenges out there is that we have moved away from a world where if we got one or two things right, as was the case during the Cold War, many things would flow from it. Now, we live in a world where getting a few things right still means there are still many things wrong, for which we could pay a substantial price.

How do you measure impact when dealing with long-term issues?

We have to avoid the conceit of believing that just because we think something is important that it really is. We also have to avoid the conceit that, if we publish something, they will read it. It's important for institutions like this to be mindful of what difference we are making.

There are all sorts of quantitative measures we can employ, like how many people look at a website. The problem is that those are indirect measures of impact. Just because something is read doesn't mean it has impact. Influence is much harder to measure.

In an organization like this, we do our best to cover a range of issues. We consider various constituencies to which we want to connect what we produce. We consider different time horizons and try to have an impact on issues that are immediate, those that are a year or two away, and also those that are decades away.

We need to have a sense of priorities and discipline so we don't let the urgent crowd out the important.

It is important to ask ourselves if we are doing everything possible to produce quality, policy-relevant work and then connect this work, wholesale and retail, with constituencies we believe would benefit from it.

We have to be relentless in asking those questions and following up on the answers and, if we do that enough, we will have impact even if we can't always measure it.

Is there a description of this job for you or is it dictated by events?

I spent years teaching management, and wrote a book about it. Some days I do better than others in practicing what I preach.

This year, my three priorities are to look after the financial health of this institution; to increase and improve our digital presence; and to launch a new set of educational initiatives.

It's humbling to look at my schedule and the correlation between those three priorities and how I'm actually spending my hours. I do my best to spend the necessary time on those issues. However, as the head of the organization, I also have to spend an enormous amount of time on things that, while not my priorities, are still essential. I also try to save time to do my own intellectual work. For example, I am writing a book explaining the deteriorating world situation.

We never want to simply be reacting to what comes into the inbox. We need to have a sense of priorities and discipline so we don't let the urgent crowd out the important. That is a daily battle.

Is it hard to remain optimistic that we will meet the challenges ahead?

I think that two things matter more than anything else in life: ideas and people. I believe ideas and people can be powerful change agents. I'm also a realist in that virtually nothing is inevitable, but, again, I remain optimistic that people who are animated by ideas can make a meaningful difference. ●

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