Getting Away With It: How Governments Sew Up Foreign Policies in Advance

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Few foreign policies deal with a single subject matter in isolation from all others. Instead, any given foreign policy will likely have an impact on multiple issue areas, whether by design or by unintended consequence. Sometimes, foreign policy-makers have incentives to conceal or downplay the relatedness of the issues to which their policies pertain. For example, when the U.S. supplies military aid to friendly regimes with poor human rights records, an unintended consequence of U.S. foreign policy might be to worsen the prospects of democratic reforms taking hold in that country. Such an adverse effect of military aid is not something that foreign policy-makers will want to trumpet; instead, they will seek to maintain a focus on the appropriateness of the aid from a military perspective. At other times, however, foreign policy issue areas are deliberately sewn together in order to increase the appeal of a particular policy. In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the George W. Bush administration sought to build popular and political support for its policies with recourse to international law, humanitarian concerns, economic objectives, as well as claims regarding regional and U.S. national security.

In this essay, I discuss how governments strategically bundle foreign policies in order to achieve political support for their actions. I argue that all foreign policies are the results of political considerations, bargaining, and logrolling—that is, foreign policies are stitched together in order to appease the greatest number of potential stakeholders while limiting the number of potential opponents (at home and abroad). While understanding this phenomenon of strategic bundling is important from the analytic perspective of foreign policy scholars, it is also critical for a normative reason: to help others in the public square better understand and evaluate the actions taken by governments on the international stage. Theoretically, I draw upon the scholarship of political scientist E.E. Schattschneider, whose work remains an indispensable guide to the organization and execution of political conflict. Empirically, I focus upon U.S. (and British) foreign policy towards overseas military bases.

Politics and Foreign Policy

Foreign policy, like any branch of politics, is about ‘who gets what, when, how’ (Lasswell, 1950); it involves conflict over the distribution of resources. Moreover, the stakes can be high: contemporary U.S. foreign policy costs billions of dollars to finance and deals with weighty issues of right and wrong, morality and immorality, life and death. Those charged with formulating and executing foreign policy therefore have powerful incentives to maintain a firm grip on the policy-making process: as E.E. Schattschneider (1957 and 1960) argued decades ago, politics is not just about conflict itself, but also the management of conflict—its scope and organization. Before it can be decided who gets what, when, how, it must first be determined—whether implicitly or explicitly—who is included in the conversation, what is up for grabs, and what timetables and processes will be used to conduct the discussion. These prior questions of procedure are highly political in nature; how they are resolved will affect the subsequent decisions over substance.

Essentially, Schattschneider’s model of politics constitutes an injunction to problematize the ground upon which distributive conflict takes place. One of his lasting contributions to the study of politics is the idea that the organization of conflict is endogenous to conflict itself. This perspective implies that political combatants must be adroit at defining the salience of issues and delineating the circle of participants. All participants in conflict must be cognizant of

procedure and process; they must be ready to expand or contract the conversation depending upon their own strategic interests. If participants fail to organize conflict in a way that advantages them and disadvantages their opponents, then it is highly likely that they will incur losses on the substantive issues at stake.

In the realm of foreign policy, the bundling of issue-areas constitutes one way via which actors can achieve the strategic goals stated above. By coupling two or more foreign policy issues through deed or through rhetoric, elected officials and bureaucrats, in particular, can enlarge the range of issues to which foreign policies are seen to apply; at the same time, they can control the size and makeup of the interested audience. Conversely, by downplaying the connectedness of two issue areas or by moving to uncouple particular topics, any given debate can be narrowed in scope and certain participants excluded from the conversation. Although it is not just governmental officials who have a say in foreign policy, Schattschneider himself was clear that "the best point at which to manage conflict is before it starts" (Schattschneider 1960: 15). Undoubtedly, those operating within the state's decision-making apparatus have a first-mover advantage in this regard.

Overseas Military Bases

In the real world, how does foreign policy bundling work as a strategy of managing the scope of conflict? What are some of the practical and normative implications of the practice? A brief consideration of U.S. (and British) foreign policies towards overseas military bases will help to answer these questions. First and foremost, military bases are created and maintained for military purposes: they are temporary or permanent facilities designed to host military forces in pursuit of military objectives. Since World War II, billions of dollars have been spent maintaining U.S. overseas military bases in the name of ensuring national security and defending U.S. allies. In the Cold War, the primary purpose of such bases was to defend against the Soviet military threat; as a consequence, the biggest concentrations of overseas bases were to be found in Europe and East Asia, the two most important theaters of the Cold War. Since the 1990s, the military-security rationale of maintaining a vast global footprint has shifted to center on ensuring regional stability, reassuring allies, keeping strategic sea lanes open, fighting against transnational terrorism, and—since the early 2000s—maintaining security in active warzones such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

Yet military bases have much broader social and political implications than just the promotion of U.S. national security. In her classic investigation into gender and international politics, Cynthia Enloe (1990) found that overseas military bases wrought incredible change upon their host nations (and vice versa). She pointed to the intermingling of service personnel and adjacent civilian populations, the economic relations that were fostered, the personal and sexual relationships that formed, and the social attitudes that were changed. Enloe linked the presence of overseas bases to prostitution and the spread of sexually transmitted infections. She noted that military installations could serve as catalysts for women's political organization, but also as institutions that marginalized and disempowered women across the world. More recent critical investigations into U.S. bases similarly have linked overseas installations to myriad themes (e.g. environmental destruction, colonialism and imperialism, nuclear insecurity, gross abuses of human rights, high rates of sexual assault) that sit uncomfortably alongside the notion that military bases are purely military affairs (e.g. Lutz 2009; Vine 2009; Yeo 2011).

Clearly, those responsible for handling U.S. security policy have a vested interest in downplaying these adverse policy implications of the U.S. global footprint. Instead, then, officials tend to focus upon other—more positive—implications of overseas bases. Overseas military bases assist in the smooth functioning of the international economy, for example, because forwardly deployed maritime forces are essential for keeping sea lanes open and free of piracy. Military bases can be keystone employers, helping to drive local economies and regional economies. Bases also play an important humanitarian role by creating the infrastructure necessary to mobilize rapid responses to crises such as natural disasters. As I describe below, military bases even have been portrayed as useful tools in the service of environmental protection.

Understood via Schattschneider's framework, U.S. officials have been wise to associate their overseas bases with such positive—albeit subsidiary—implications and issue-areas because the reality of politics means that no foreign policy is ever set in stone. All policy depends upon politics, and politics is fluid. Military bases, in particular, are susceptible to political change at home if, for example, legislators decide to cut funds for overseas bases. Such an

attack could arise out of fiscal concerns, ideological opposition to overseas engagement, or simply because of a judgment that the strategic value of overseas bases does not outweigh the negative consequences that they entail. Abroad, too, military bases can be vulnerable to political change (Calder 2007; Cooley 2008). Host nations or local opposition groups could (and do) mobilize against foreign bases. At times, such opposition has led to the closure of U.S. bases, including most recently the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan. Given these latent threats to bases' longevity, the political challenge for foreign policy-makers (who have decided, a priori, that military bases are essential to the national interest) is to devise and disseminate foreign policies in such a way as to create the broadest possible support for bases. Bundling is one response to this pressing challenge.

Military Bases and Environmentalism

One of the most interesting and overlooked ways in which foreign policy executives and bureaucrats have sought to increase the acceptability of military bases (in the eyes of domestic and international audiences) has been to embrace environmental protection regimes as part-and-parcel of basing strategies—that is, to bundle together military and environmental concerns. Because military bases often impose a high degree of seclusion and insularity upon their immediate physical surroundings, resulting in the (unintended) creation of *de facto* nature reserves, it is common for bases to be adjacent to areas of natural beauty or special ecological value. Wildlife flourishes where military ordinances outlaw permanent civilian habitation—on live fire ranges, testing and training grounds, demilitarized zones, disused fortifications, and so forth. In turn, military conservation can be used as a *post hoc* rationalization for the existence of military bases: to retain military custodianship of the countryside or the wilderness is to maintain an effective and irreplaceable conservation regime, whereas to close such bases would be to jeopardize a vulnerable ecosystem.

Guam is one military site where a foreign policy of maintaining a permanent military presence has been bundled with a policy of environmentalism. A U.S. territory since 1898, Guam (today an organized, unincorporated U.S. territory) is one of Washington's most important overseas possessions, from a military standpoint. Big enough to host large numbers of troops and heavy-duty airstrips, and blessed with a deep harbor, Guam is a veritable anchor of the U.S. military presence in the Western Pacific. From Guam, the U.S. can exercise control over vital sea lanes and plan to conduct military operations—air, sea, and land—across the Asia-Pacific region.

Since 1993, Guam has also been the site of an expansive environmental reserve, the Guam National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Indeed, visitors to Guam are encouraged to take advantage of the rich natural environment that the Guam NWR is supposedly in place to protect. The vast majority of the wildlife refuge is under the jurisdiction of the Department of Defense and is kept off-limits to civilians—tourists, to be sure, but also the indigenous Chamorro people of Guam. The justification given is that Guam's natural environment has suffered terribly at the hands of human encroachment; military stewardship of the island's wilderness is a good thing because it gives native flora and fauna an opportunity to thrive in peace and isolation. In short, there are positive environmental benefits to be derived from the U.S. military's presence on Guam and the Pentagon's ownership (and control) of the land. Upsetting this political status quo would be detrimental to the cause of conservation.

Is the Guam NWR a genuine attempt to preserve the natural environment? Or is it a cynical add-on to the Pentagon's overseas basing strategy that is designed for public consumption more than anything else? Critics have certainly accused the U.S. government of cynicism when it comes to the construction of environmental reserves around other island bases. David Vine and Miriam Pemberton, for example, accuse the Bush administration of using environmental protection initiatives as an excuse for maintaining control over strategically located islands in the Pacific—especially the Johnston Atoll, Wake Island, and Midway Island. Even though military activities are known to be disastrous for the natural environment, using the language of conservation and enacting laws that claim the mantle of environmentalism can "add a positive environmentalist spin to the permanent U.S claim on these territories as military outposts," write Vine and Pemberton.

The U.S. base on Diego Garcia in the British-controlled Chagos Archipelago (central Indian Ocean) is the most recent overseas base to be surrounded by an environmental protection regime. Diego Garcia is a deeply controversial installation, not least of all because several thousand indigenous islanders, expelled from the territory in

the 1960s and 1970s, still claim the island (and the rest of Chagos) as their rightful home (Vine 2009; Jeffery 2011; Evers and Kooy 2011). Neighboring Mauritius, too, claims the entire Chagos Archipelago as part of its sovereign territory. The base has been marred by official admissions that it was used as a staging post for extraordinary rendition flights and is currently mired in allegations that it is (or has been) the location of a CIA 'black site' prison.

Several foreign policy issues thus intersect over Diego Garcia. The base is not merely a tool of military power-projection as it was designed to be in the 1960s and 1970s: instead, the base is firmly connected to questions of indigenous peoples' rights, imperialism and colonialism, international law, civil liberties, human rights and torture, and much more. All of these issues threaten to spill over and affect the U.S. base in the political sphere; all of them are issues that the Pentagon would prefer not to have bundled together with its military aims. How can support for Diego Garcia be maintained, however, when there is such fertile ground for criticizing its very existence?

Politically, responsibility for maintaining Diego Garcia as a venue for the U.S. military rests with the British government—not the United States. Yet London has proven to be just as adept at foreign policy bundling as has Washington. In 2010, Britain declared a marine protected area in the Chagos Islands in a move that many saw as designed to buttress the Anglo-Americans' control over Diego Garcia and undermine the claims of their detractors (especially Mauritius and the Chagos Islanders). In critical circles, such policy-packaging was castigated as "greenwashing"—that is, a cynical adoption of "green" and "environmentally-friendly" policies for disingenuous or even deceitful purposes. Nevertheless, the conservation zone went ahead, drawing significant support from environmentalist organizations and conservation groups, including in the academic and scientific communities. In effect, the decision to bundle military affairs and environmentalism succeeded in redefining the political debate over Diego Garcia: the question for many is now not so much whether it is just and proper for a military base to take precedence over the rights of the indigenous islanders of the claims of post-colonial Mauritius, but rather whether or not the natural environment—a "pristine" safe haven for endangered species—can be risked by altering the status quo.

Conclusion

Governments are strategic when it comes to stitching together their foreign policies. Bundling certain issue-areas together can be an important means of agenda-setting or framing. Divorcing other issue-areas can similarly help in the 'sale' of foreign policies to domestic and international constituencies. How foreign policies are put together and portrayed is rarely a matter of happenstance, but rather is the product of political considerations. Such fusion of foreign policy issues therefore warrants careful critical attention from analysts and ordinary citizens alike.

This is clearly the case when it comes to military environmentalism and overseas bases. Military installations are not by their nature concerned with the preservation of the natural environment, yet have been cast as such in recent years. In the process, new political stakeholders have come to see themselves with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo surrounding military bases—environmentalists, conservationists, and their financial backers. The questions that must be asked are these: Why has such an unnatural melding of militarism and environmentalism been decided upon? Which issues pertaining to military bases are being downplayed? And which issues are being completely concealed from public view via the foregrounding of environmentalism? The answers will not be volunteered by those in positions of power.

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