2017 Domenici Public Policy Conference Keynote Address on U.S. Foreign Policy

Las Cruces, New Mexico
September 13, 2017

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I am deeply grateful to have this opportunity to speak at the Domenici Institute at the invitation of my good friend Senator Pete Domenici. We served concurrently in the United States Senate over a period of 32 years, during which time we were close friends and frequent collaborators. We both had the privilege of representing our states in the Senate for 36 years, and both of us finished our terms as the longest serving Senators from our respective states.

For decades, Senator Domenici was a dynamic and trusted leader in the Senate, who was known for his fairness and his deep expertise on an array of subjects. On the budget, few Senators ever inspired so much confidence among their colleagues as Pete Domenici. His command of budgetary facts was legendary, and he always handled the contentiousness of the budget process with good humor and honesty. Similarly, he was the unquestioned leader of the Senate on nuclear energy, numerous topics affecting the Western states, and mental health issues.

Senator Domenici’s activities related to foreign policy were less publicized, but he made enormous contributions to our national security, and he was one of the key players in global non-proliferation policy. I am so pleased that the Domenici Institute continues Pete’s legacy and advances learning and discussion on so many important issues. I had the privilege of speaking to Pete on the telephone on Saturday afternoon. It was a short conversation. His voice was weak but sincere as always. I appreciate him so much and am so sad that he is not with us here today. I send my best wishes to his family and to all of you who revere him as much as I have.

It is very common when opening a speech on foreign policy to ascribe the most cataclysmic possibilities to the current problems confronting us. I try to avoid that temptation, given the number of wars and economic shocks that our nation has experienced over the last century, including World War II and the Great Depression. Very often dangerous crises that appeared intractable are resolved over time through national fortitude and the application of wise policies.

But there is no denying that we live in dangerous times. We look at the Indian subcontinent with two heavily armed nuclear powers in a caldron of territorial disputes, terrorism, and historic animosities. We think of the Middle East with so many cross-cutting problems, sources of instability and
proliferation scenarios. We ponder how many terrorist cells associated with Al Qaeda or the Islamic State are configuring plots for major terrorist attacks. We lament the reversion of relations with Russia that has brought greater instability to the world and the re-imposition of a Cold War mentality.

But most attention recently has been on North Korea with its growing arsenal of nuclear weapons and its deeply unpredictable regime. Although the North Korean leaders are committed to the rational goal of their own survival, the hair-trigger status of the armaments on the Korean Peninsula and the insular nature of the North Korean regime intensify the risks. With each provocative weapons test, we wonder how the Peninsula can be stabilized.

I share the views expressed by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that the key to peacefully resolving the North Korean nuclear problem is our relationship with China. I applaud reports that some progress has been made on constructing a more cooperative approach with China directed at mitigating the risks of North Korea and that Secretary Tillerson is giving this his deep personal attention.

I also was heartened by reports that President Trump will appoint Victor Cha, a respected scholar, to be Ambassador to South Korea. I had the chance to travel to that country with Victor Cha in 2013, and I know the depth of his insights on the region. I am hopeful that he will be appointed and become a central contributor to our policy toward the Korean Peninsula.

As important as policy toward North Korea is at this moment, it is essential for any new Administration to avoid defining foreign policy solely in terms of crisis response. If an Administration falls into this pattern or focuses too much on short-term media considerations, U.S. foreign policy will suffer over the long run.

We should be expecting each President to construct a strategic vision that attempts to integrate all levers of American power. We should expect them to play geopolitical offense, not just hunker down in a defensive posture.

This has become increasingly difficult for any President to manage, in part because instantaneous global communications draw the world’s attention to ever more minute occurrences that are portrayed as significant. Administrations are expected to react to crises, but the definition of crisis has become so broad that great discipline is needed to avoid lurching from problem to problem.

At this stage, the Trump Administration has not signaled an interest or demonstrated a capacity for broad strategic thought. Its foreign policy actions have been narrowly defensive. The President has put great rhetorical energy into his proposals to build a border wall, block entry to immigrants from certain countries, and expel undocumented immigrants already in the country. He has withdrawn the United States from the crucial negotiations on the Trans Pacific Partnership, and he has questioned whether NAFTA should continue, at least in its present form. He also has bickered with traditional allies and declined opportunities to reinforce the U.S. commitment to NATO’s Article V, which obligates all members to come to the aid of other members. And he has withdrawn the United States from the Paris Accords on Climate Change.
Taken together, these policies have a certain coherence. All of them are focused on limiting foreign impacts on the United States by restricting trade, immigration, and alliance commitments. But this doesn’t constitute a foreign policy vision. Rather it represents a downsizing of the U.S. leadership role in the world and a pause in the U.S. government’s involvement in maximizing our nation’s competitiveness. It is a foreign policy that neglects to play geopolitical offense.

By “playing offense” I mean taking actions that are aimed at strengthening the position and capabilities of the United States to advance its global security and interests over the long run. Setting aside the military, during the last several generations, our primary offensive tools have been expanding our share of global trade and building alliances among responsible nations, especially fellow democracies. Alliances have widened our influence and zones of security and bound other nations to us. This has greatly reduced the chances of conflict and allowed nations with which we have important trade and cultural ties to thrive in a secure environment. Our alliances have been reinforced by trade agreements and systems for peacefully adjudicating trade disputes.

In the contemporary context, global trade is unsettling to many Americans. But trade is essential to any economy. It expands choices for consumers, holds down inflation, gives businesses the widest possible markets, stimulates innovation, and promotes economic growth.

We know that the most powerful force in the dislocation of American manufacturing is automation and the advancement of technology, especially information technology. These efficiencies have made our workers far more productive than they were at the beginning of this century. When industries produce more with less labor, workers lose jobs.

The main challenge in responding to these economic dislocations is improving the business environment and finding ways to retrain workers and connect them to new jobs, often in different locations. This is a hard process, but it is not impossible. We doom our nation’s workforce to a dismal future if we shift the blame to trade and immigrants, instead of attacking the real challenge. We also know that attempting to isolate a nation from trade competition is a self-defeating strategy that will hurt those at the bottom of the economic ladder before anyone else.

One of the ironies of the Trump Presidency thus far is that the American military – especially our ability to project forces over land, sea, and air across the globe – is the ultimate guarantor of the post-World War II economic prosperity that is based on the free movement of goods, services, ideas, and, to some extent, people across borders. Yet even as the President touts our military prowess and pledges to expand our already potent military capabilities, he is nullifying or threatening some of the most important trade initiatives on which our future prosperity depends.

Meanwhile, Russia, China, India, and other nations are on the offensive in global affairs. They are positioning their countries to take advantage of political and technological trends that will transform global society. American businesses, scientists, universities and many others are engaged in similar endeavors. Our robust free market and intellectual openness provide us with great advantages. But in
too many areas, our government is moving in a protectionist direction that will offset some of these inherent advantages.

Prosperity and security for succeeding generations depends on how our country’s government and industries prepare for the future. Often this depends on the development of technology and how we respond to it. In my lifetime, I have witnessed numerous technological shocks to the global order. Most of them have brought both great benefits and great risks that required visionary statecraft to manage. Among these technological shocks were the creation of antibiotics and other life-extending drugs, the splitting of the atom, the space race, the green revolution that greatly expanded crop yields, the widespread use of birth control, the development of the microchip, and the building of the internet.

Each of these developments changed global conditions in profound ways and forced international leaders to adapt to new realities. We would be supremely naive to believe that we will not be facing shifts at least as disruptive and profound in the coming decade as the ones I have just mentioned. We already can see the dynamic changes in such fields as artificial intelligence, cyberwarfare, and genetic modification, to name a few.

My point is that foreign policy cannot be limited to crisis response and short-term goals that attempt to address a few campaign promises on the margins of what really counts for U.S. competitiveness. The demands of foreign policy are inexorable. If we take a break from global activities, others will fill the void. This has happened with the Trans Pacific Partnership. Our withdrawal from negotiations has achieved nothing for American workers and industries. It merely has strengthened Chinese trade leverage with partners in East Asia. Asian nations who might have preferred to do business with the United States are now much more likely to turn to China.

Climate change is another case in point. The warming of the globe is a disaster, but it also can be an opportunity. The political argument over climate change has been between those who see it as an overblown liberal obsession or even a hoax, and those who see it as a grave environmental problem to be solved through sacrifice. I believe we need to see climate change, first, as a fundamental condition of global affairs. Whether some like it or not, most of the world has accepted the compelling and growing scientific proof supporting the contention that the earth is warming, at least in part due to man-made causes. This fact makes the President’s withdrawal from the Paris Climate Treaty a dead loss for U.S. prestige and leadership.

The global acceptance of climate change science is having a profound effect on the international economy. Already there is exploding demand for affordable sources of clean energy and the technologies necessary to store, move, and distribute that energy efficiently. These technologies are becoming less and less expensive and the industries and nations that perfect them will enjoy the potential for strong economic growth, cleaner environments, less expensive industrial inputs, and potentially more equitable distribution of energy resources. They also will bring enormous benefits for national security over the long run, if domestic energy generation is highly diversified and independent
on energy imports from volatile regions of the world.

Without a doubt, American entrepreneurs have been and will continue to work on these technologies. But government policy is important to the process. If the official policy of the United States government focuses on de-emphasizing climate change rather than leading a technological revolution in energy resources and generation, the American economy will be a huge loser, just as it would have been had government policies inhibited development of the microchip or life-saving drugs. As with trade, China is attempting to position itself as a leader on climate change to take advantage of a declining American role.

As we attempt to advance a more strategic foreign policy, there is another concern that is fundamental to the process. Is American politics allowing for the kind of resources and leadership capacity that we need to implement an ambitious foreign policy vision? Over my long years of service in the Senate with Pete Domenici, one of our historic commonalities was that we were both mayors before coming to the Senate. I was mayor of Indianapolis, while Pete was mayor of Albuquerque. Relatively few Senators had mayoral experience, though it was not unheard of. I had many conversations with Pete over the years about urban policy and the process of running a city. Perhaps more than any other elected office, mayors have the least latitude to get caught up in ideology. That doesn’t mean that mayors don’t have strong political and social views. But they are usually judged by other criteria: is the garbage collected; is snow removed from the streets promptly after a snowfall; do the police they oversee keep the streets safe in a fair and equitable manner? This causes mayors to think in terms of capabilities. We are always asking what do we need to get the job done?

Many observers see U.S. foreign policy as a set of decisions, but I learned many years ago that it is more about maximizing capabilities and sustaining leverage. Like a big city mayor, we need to ask if we have everything we need to implement a robust foreign policy. At this stage, unfortunately, our capabilities are in serious doubt.

This can be seen most alarmingly in the condition of the State Department eight months into the Trump presidency. As of Labor Day, the President had nominated just 3 out of 20 Assistant Secretaries at the State Department and only one 1 of the 20 had been confirmed. Many of you may be familiar with State Department organization, but for those of you who are not, an Assistant Secretary post at State is an extremely powerful and consequential position that drives policy toward a broad geographic area or an important functional specialty. Among the Assistant Secretary slots that are currently vacant are those overseeing policy in East Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. We also are lacking nominees for assistant secretary posts that handle functional specialties, such as arms control, business and economic affairs, and diplomatic security.

On top of this, the Administration has proposed budget cuts for State Department operations of roughly 30 percent. While the cuts actually implemented won’t be that severe because of cooler heads in Congress, there is undoubtedly a concerted attempt to downsize the State Department’s role and capabilities. If the State Department is an empty shell and ultimately lacks stable leadership, it will be
much harder to fulfill its historical role and promote U.S. interests.

Although some of this deficiency results from President Trump attempting to run foreign policy out of a chaotic White House, the problem of resources predates the current Administration. We fail to appreciate how diplomats have contributed heroically to the security and well-being of our country. The tragic death of Ambassador Chris Stevens and three others in Benghazi in 2012 was yet another reminder that our diplomats are on the front lines in the war on terrorism. Chris worked on my Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff, so I got to know him well. His advice to me on the complexities of the Middle East was invaluable. After he went back to State, he returned from time to time to brief me, especially after his extraordinary tour as the U.S. representative to the rebels in Benghazi during the revolt against the Qadhafi regime.

It was clear to me that what made Chris such a skilled diplomat was his ability to connect with people on the ground. He would meet and converse with soldiers, militiamen, shopkeepers, and villagers, as well as with ministers, generals, and bureaucrats. It’s what our best diplomats have always done. Chris was not content to stay behind the Embassy walls in Tripoli. He knew he needed to see the situation in Benghazi for himself.

Just as we give our military the weapons they need, we have to make sure our diplomatic troops have all the tools they need. As both the working outposts of the government and symbols of our country, our embassies are prime targets for terrorists. When I was Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, we conducted a two-year study of embassy security. One of the things we found was that nearly every day, somewhere in the world, the United States receives some type of threat against its embassies, consulates, or other diplomatic facilities overseas.

As we know, the entire State Department budget is a popular target for cuts. But even as we recognize these dynamics, we must be explaining to Congress and the American people why resources devoted to foreign affairs are a bargain for U.S. national security and for our own economic and moral standing in the world.

Wars and extended military operations are enormously expensive in lives and dollars. We have spent hundreds of billions of dollars in recent years fighting wars and preparing for military scenarios in underdeveloped regions of the world. Foreign affairs programs can mitigate national security risks and improve U.S. connections to peoples and governments. They may well save huge military expenditures down the road. This is one of the reasons why the Defense Department has been a strong advocate of a robust foreign affairs budget.

Diplomacy is a cornerstone of U.S. national security. Diplomats help build alliances and win the cooperation we need for joint military action. They arrange intelligence sharing and law enforcement partnerships to fight terrorists, drug cartels, and international criminal syndicates. Our embassies contain personnel from a score of agencies, including Treasury officials working to cut off terrorist financing and FBI agents gathering evidence used to make arrests and thwart terrorist attacks here in
Since World War II, the most essential factor in preventing conflict has been U.S. leadership. We may have made some mistakes during that time, but the overarching effect of America’s commitment to global order has been the growth of international norms and institutions that have checked conflict, promoted human rights, and expanded stability.

For decades, both Democrat and Republican presidents have embraced American global leadership on a bipartisan basis. Today, American leadership is no longer a certainty and foreign policy issues are more likely to be used as political footballs. We need to find our way back to the notion that politics stops at the water’s edge. If strong and comprehensive American leadership is withdrawn from the global stage, the people of the United States and most countries of the world will become poorer and will have to endure more frequent conflict.

But even as we wrestle with consequential global issues and divisions within our own country, I remain optimistic about the future of the United States and our contributions to the progress of human advancement. Our economic and military strength are second to none. Our institutions are grounded in a resilient Constitution and almost two and a half centuries of tradition. It is no secret why people of talent from all over the world want to come to our country to live and work.

I believe that the American people are proud of the historic leadership role of our country and protective of our freedoms and open democracy. I appreciate all that each of you are doing through your work, your studies, and your service to enliven productive debate and contribute to the social and economic fabric of our nation. I look forward to what we can achieve together.