



Vail Daily column: Foreign policy on the brink

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Is the world a safer place today than it was five years ago? Do our friends respect us and adversaries fear us more or less than they did five years ago? Any fair assessment of the efficacy of the administration's foreign policy must include these questions.

David Brooks of The New York Times, no right-winger, recently told Chuck Todd on NBC's "Meet The Press," "Basically since Yalta we've had an assumption that borders are basically going to be borders, and once that comes into question, if in Ukraine or in Crimea or anywhere else, then all over the world all bets are off. And let's face it, Obama, whether deservedly or not, does have a — I'll say it crudely — a manhood problem in the Middle East. Is he tough enough to stand up to somebody like Assad or somebody like Putin? I think a lot of the rap is unfair, but certainly in the Middle East there is an assumption that he's not tough enough."

Meanwhile, the president's foreign policy detractors agree with Brooks' basic tenet and believe the difficulties and lack of respect we're experiencing in the world today are due primarily because Obama is viewed as a weak leader without a coherent foreign policy. Meanwhile his supporters respond by asking the same rhetorical question, "So what would you do about ..." insert one — Syria, Iran, Crimea, North Korea or the Chinese — with the sarcasm-laced assumption that it's not the president's fault and there are no easy answers to these issues.

Perhaps they're correct, but the president's supporters miss the point. Yes, these are complex issues, but the world of geopolitics is a three-dimensional chess match where perception is reality. And a truly effective foreign policy is most accurately judged by how these types of matters are dealt with before they make front-page news.

During the lead-up to the Persian Gulf War, then President George H.W. Bush delivered a veiled threat to Saddam Hussein that use of biological and chemical weapons against U.S. troops during that conflict would prompt a devastating U.S. military response. That warning was widely interpreted as meaning a nuclear strike. Saddam Hussein never used biological or chemical weapons against our troops during that conflict.

Meanwhile, the CATO institute tells us the United States is on the brink of committing a cardinal sin in foreign policy — antagonizing two major powers simultaneously. There are frictions in bilateral ties with both Moscow and Beijing that have reached alarming levels during the past year or so. It is a disturbing development that could cause major geopolitical headaches for Washington unless the Obama administration takes prompt corrective measures and sets more coherent priorities.

The groundwork for many of the foreign policy issues we face in the world today began when President Obama took office and appointed his then secretary of state, Hillary Clinton. From that moment forward, for better or worse, the two became the managers and architects of American foreign policy.

Quote of the day: “Bad domestic policy can defeat us, but bad foreign policy can kill us” — John F. Kennedy

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