



## 5 Questions with Chris Preble on Allies, Afghanistan, and Free Market Cocktails

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*This is the latest installment of our 5 Questions series, in which we feature an expert, practitioner, or leader answering — you guessed it — five questions on topics of current relevance in the world of defense, security, and foreign policy. Well, four of the questions are topical. The fifth is about booze. We are War on the Rocks, after all.*

*This week I spoke with [Christopher Preble](#), vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. He is the author or editor of several books, including [The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free](#) and [Terrorizing Ourselves: Why U.S. Counterterrorism Policy is Failing and How to Fix It](#). Preble was a commissioned officer in the U.S. Navy, and served onboard the USS Ticonderoga (CG-47) from 1990 to 1993. He holds a Ph.D. in history from Temple University.*

**1. Since President Obama’s foreign policy speech at West Point last week, you’ve written about [the gap](#) between his hopes for greater burden-sharing by America’s allies and the contribution that [they’re actually likely to make](#). Can you explain why this is the case? Is there anything that the U.S. can do to encourage our allies to carry more of the weight of shared strategic challenges?**

Our allies are unlikely to pick up the slack unless the United States pulls back on its promises to defend others from harm, and reshapes its military accordingly.

This has been clear since at least the mid-1960s, when Mancur Olson and Richard Zeckhauser first articulated an [economic theory of alliances](#). Because there is a general tendency for smaller nations to free ride on the security assurances of larger ones, Olson and Zeckhauser predicted that “American attempts to persuade her allies to bear larger shares of the common burden are apt to do nothing more than breed division and resentment.” Their predictions have proved more accurate than they could have guessed: As the [infographic posted here](#) clearly shows, Americans continue to spend far more on the military than our European and Asian allies, notwithstanding countless attempts to cajole them into doing more.

As for what we can do to change it, I tend to agree with MIT’s Barry Posen who explains in his new book, [Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy](#), that America’s allies “make their defense decisions in the face of extravagant United States promises to defend them. They

will not do more unless the United States credibly commits to doing less.” (Another plug: Posen will be discussing his book [at Cato on June 12<sup>th</sup>](#).)

## **2. Beyond that issue, do you have any specific thoughts on the speech? Did it live up to expectations? Were there any missed opportunities?**

I had pretty low expectations going in, so I wasn't disappointed. I was briefly concerned that the president might embrace a new interventionist agenda, bowing to his critics, and pledging to send U.S. troops into the middle of more civil wars around the world, or risk a major confrontation with Russia or China.

But he obviously didn't do that. I suppose he learned his lesson the hard way when he tried to intervene militarily in Syria last summer. Even though this operation was supposed to be “unbelievably small” in Secretary of State John Kerry's words, the public was still overwhelmingly opposed. And I think the public's concerns were well-founded. There was not a compelling U.S. national interest at stake in Syria, and there wasn't an obvious mission for the U.S. military. Neither of these facts have changed since September of last year. Arming the Syrian opposition (to be precise, those members of the opposition who are not linked to al Qaeda now, or might be in the future) is unlikely to tip the scales decisively against Assad's forces. I do worry that aid to those who could get through the vetting process could eventually draw the United States into precisely the sort of deeper involvement that the public opposes, as [this paper explained](#), but that seems pretty unlikely right now.

In retrospect, it was dumb of me to think that the president would reject wholesale the model that has got him this far (“[don't do stupid stuff](#)” is the mantra, Tom Friedman tells us).

I was briefly fooled into thinking that the president's speech might signal a 180 degree turn because I was paying too much attention to what the foreign policy establishment believes and wants. I've seen some commentators (including my friend [Bryan McGrath at WOTR](#)) lamenting that the speech gave the American people the foreign policy they want, but not the foreign policy that they need. However, with all due respect to Bryan, I don't see any other credible alternative. The sensible course is for the president and other foreign policy makers to adapt to the public mood, and fashion a foreign policy that can win broad public support. So far, Obama seems to be doing that.

True, the public isn't particularly energized about foreign policy, generally, but they might be if it looked as though we were nearing another major, costly conflict. Though the elites are loathe to admit it, in certain instances, public sentiment can constrain Washington's interventionist biases.

We appear to be in one of those occasions. The advocates of the Iraq war assured the American people that that war would be cheap and easy, and deliver clear security benefits to the nation. The public was fooled once, but isn't likely to be fooled again; at least not any time soon.

## **3. The administration announced last week that 9,800 American troops will remain in Afghanistan after 2014, when combat operations will come to an end, and that by 2016 it**

**will be reduced further to a small, residual force. As an independent war effort, the U.S. mission is clearly coming to an end. But as just one aspect (albeit a major one) of the broader “war on terrorism,” this will mark a transformation of our comprehensive counterterrorism strategy. How do you think the next, post-Afghanistan chapter of U.S. counterterrorism should look?**

I think the next chapter of U.S. counterterrorism should look mostly like the last chapter, absent the costly and quixotic nation-building mission in Afghanistan. If you look at the range of things that have been done to degrade al Qaeda’s ability to carry out another 9/11-style attack – from restrictions on the movement of money, to measures that have made it hard for al Qaeda to attract new recruits, to various efforts to round up or kill senior AQ leaders, including bin Laden himself – very little of this has depended upon a large military presence in Afghanistan. There is no reason to think that the end of the combat mission there will signal an end to U.S. counterterrorism efforts. On the contrary, freeing up resources that are now inordinately focused on just one place should improve such efforts.

Taking a step back, however, I think that we are nearing a point at which senior policymakers can have an adult conversation with the American people about terrorism. Given the trauma that we all felt immediately after 9/11, it was inevitable that some measures would be pushed through that wouldn’t have passed muster otherwise. Concepts such as “never again” and the “1 percent doctrine” prevailed. Many Americans felt that almost anything that was done to fight terrorism was justified.

Now the mood has shifted. Even though fear of terrorism among the public at large remains quite high, there is greater scrutiny over policies ostensibly geared to fighting terrorism. There is considerable opposition to the National Security Agency gathering data on innocent Americans’ phone calls and emails. The Transportation Security Administration is held in low regard. Some even question whether we need a Department of Homeland Security. Most of this public resistance is grounded in subjective notions about privacy and what constitutes unreasonable searches. But we now also have some good empirical data on the actual costs of counterterrorism policies, in dollars spent, and resources allocated or misallocated. I particularly commend [the work of my colleague John Mueller](#), and his frequent collaborator Mark Stewart, on this score.

Lastly, we should try to remember that terrorism works by inducing fear, which, in turn, leads governments to enact policies to try reduce that fear, or otherwise reassure the public. But oftentimes these policies prove costly or counterproductive. If we are not fearful, the terrorists will have failed. If we refused to enact new policies that do not have a measurable impact on reducing the threat of terrorism, or if we rolled back some of the old ones that haven’t worked, then the terrorists also will have failed. Sound counterterrorism policy starts with [not terrorizing ourselves](#).

**4. Recent reports out of Ukraine suggest the appearance of schisms between various elements of the pro-Russian militias operating in the country’s east. You wrote a few weeks ago that as time goes on, Putin’s ability to influence these groups diminishes, and any infighting would surely also impact this. Given this, how do you see events unfolding in the coming months? How do you expect eastern Ukraine to look six months from now?**

The trouble with predicting the future is that it hasn't happened yet. I guessed a few weeks ago that events on the ground in Ukraine might not be dictated entirely by Vladimir Putin. That seemed a pretty safe bet. No foreign leader, not even one as cunning and manipulative as Putin, can control everything that his proxies do. When someone's family or friends are killed or injured, or his or her home or village is destroyed, the desire for revenge is pretty strong. So that is why I was worried that the chaos and violence in Ukraine might not be easily stopped by outside powers interfering, or pledging not to.

We'll have to see how the new government in Kiev performs. Politics there has been badly fragmented since Ukraine broke away from the Soviet Union, and the recent elections don't cure those problems overnight. On top of that, the government has to confront some serious economic challenges. For now, I hope that Washington will resist the urge to meddle in the internal affairs of yet another foreign country. We should be willing to advise them on ways to reform their economy and build a durable political order. But advice is just that – it is up the Ukrainian people to decide what is best for their country. And we should urge other countries to take a similar approach.

I doubt that Putin will follow those suggestions (he hasn't up to this point), so I think that economic and diplomatic pressure that raise the costs on him and his supporters is warranted. We'll have to see if that has any measurable affect on his behavior. That is what I'll be watching over the next six months.

**5. The Cato Institute describes itself as an organisation “dedicated to the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets and peace” – classical liberalism is a fair label, I think. In your opinion, what's the ideal drink for a classical liberal to imbibe?**

I could say that I enjoy wines from New Zealand and Australia – especially sauvignon blanc from New Zealand's Marlborough region – because those countries liberalized their agriculture sectors several years ago, while the European and U.S. governments continue to cling to a range of market-distorting policies. But that is too cute by half – I don't even know whether U.S. grapes are heavily subsidized or protected. Meanwhile, this classical liberal also likes beverages that happen to include at least some subsidized grains: Dewar's on the rocks, and just about any of Sam Adams seasonal brews. I just like the taste.