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Walter Russell Mead, Anklebiters, and Romney's Vision of the Future

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MATTHEW A. HILL, OCT 26 2012

Walter Russell Mead of *Special Providence* fame spoke the other day at the Institute for the Study of the Americas' seminar series examining the upcoming US presidential election, with particular emphasis on America's role in the international arena. It was a stimulating conversation that covered areas ranging from the Axis of Anklebiters to the Obama administration's failure to engage in the Palestine-Israel peace process. I had not previously heard the Axis of Anklebiters but it mockingly refers to those states (and leaders) that posture, according to Mead, to be America's number one enemy. This axis includes Venezuela's President Chavez and President Putin of the Russian Federation.

But there is one key issue that was discussed that I have been ruminating over these past 48 hours and it concerns America's role in the world as an energy independent state. I want to unpack this issue a little and think of some of the consequences. My thoughts are not fully developed so input would be greatly appreciated!

Romney has been quite vocal in his push for energy independence in the North American continent by 2020. It would, according to Romney, 'dramatically increase[e] domestic energy production', which would 'bolster the competitiveness of [...] industry in the country, creating millions of new jobs from coast to coast'. From a foreign affairs perspective, it would also mean that 'America's trade deficit w[ould] decline and the dollar w[ould] strengthen' because there would be 'fewer energy imports and more exports of manufactured goods'. Also, and rather comforting for the American population, they could all be 'rest assured that the nation's security [...] would] no longer [be] beholden to unstable but oil-rich regions half way around the world'.

Looking at energy independence from a national interest perspective I can see the attraction of producing one's own oil and gas. There are a number of disparate points that spring to mind when considering this new world. I want to consider the geo-political and -strategic implications in a world where the US is not dependent on foreign oil, and whether it has the potential for divorcing the uncomfortable alliance between interests and values when determining and explaining US foreign policy actions.

Geo-strategically it would counter any future rise in Russia's global power because the US would not be dependent on its energy resources. If the US became a net exporter of energy then it could also limit Russia's and other energy-producing states power if it sold oil and gas to Europe, Japan and other allies (which, incidentally would further America's power over these same allies).

Potentially, it could also enable the US government to no longer balance the acquisition of national interests with the language and practice of values. The deployment of values in the legitimisation of certain national interests (think Libya, potential genocide and oil) would no longer be needed because the US would not need Libya's oil. In this version of the new world, the US would no longer need to be gentle with oil producing states such as Saudi Arabia when it came to promoting values-based issues such as open society and the rights of women, and in the same breath it would silence its critics. Would the removal of oil in foreign policy decision-making help revitalise world perceptions of US actions in oil-producing regions? Probably not, but it might! Of course this perspective relies on the assumption that the US is holding back its criticism on foreign states such as Saudi Arabia because it has other more important interests than the promotion of democratic-styled values.. It also assumes that oil represents the only

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national interest in regions such as the Middle East and North Africa. Would removing a key national interest (oil security) in the Libyan intervention have made any US engagement less likely? I think not, as there were other interests at stake such as a stable region, in part because of the need to have friends in the region to support anti-terrorist investigations and in part because of the need to protect its ally Israel. I think similar interests would also apply to maintaining engagement with Saudi Arabia as well.

The list of possibilities is extensive; however, I am not sure if this would be a good or bad thing. Perhaps this is one for the modellers!

Coming back to Romney, I want to know what he means when he suggests that energy independence would ensure that US national security would no longer be 'beholden' to the 'unstable but oil-rich regions'. It seems to me that it is an atomised and singularly unconnected thought process that concludes in its own logic that oil is the reason for US engagement in unstable regions around the world. Thus, if you remove oil from the equation then you remove the reason for engaging and being heavily involved in sticky regions. However, ignoring all other variables is dangerously and recklessly reductionist. If this is just a throw-away national interest add-on to the real focus that that energy production is all about the benefits to the US economy then I can sleep safe in my bed at night. If it is an indication of the ability of American actors to repeat past mistakes by reducing the complexity of life into an easily digested format that fulfils supporting roles for ideological frameworks then I am worried. It would mean that a President Romney would be promising people a rosier world that has no chance of budding.

In spite of my fears of Romney, I think that energy independence is less to do with America's national security and more to do with generating domestic economic growth. It may also be about supporting the needs of the energy industry, who recently gave \$10 million to his election campaign. Although, in an August 23 New York Times article someone 'close to the Romney campaign' stated that his energy plan was drafted with industry executives, and said that 'any consultation with industry officials was simply to tap their expertise and did not mean the proposal was being shaped to serve their interests'

Your thoughts?

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Read more from Matthew A. Hill in his e-IR blog, Reflections on American Politics from an Outsider

About the author:

Matthew A. Hill is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this blog is to examine US politics and pick an idea not fully-formed and run with it to see where it goes. Sometimes it will wither away but othertimes it will inspire to think about the idea further. Your input is encouraged and welcomed.