

GREAT DECISIONS DISCUSSION GROUP
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KATONAH VILLAGE LIBRARY
March 19, 2013
10:15 A. M. – 12:15 P. M.

Threat Assessment

Topic Leader: Gary Wenglowski

AGENDA

10:15: Kickoff

- Welcome and Introduction of Guests & New Chapter Members
- Administrative Items
- Topic Leader Presentation
- Group Discussion

CHAPTER MOTTO - "DISCUSSIONS SHOULD BE CONDUCTED WITHOUT FONDNESS FOR DISPUTE OR DESIRE FOR VICTORY" – BEN FRANKLIN

UPCOMING MEETINGS AND TOPICS

- April 2, 2013 -- **Egypt**
Topic Leaders: Mike Kornfield and Peter Kuniholm
- April 16, 2013 -- **Iran**
Topic Leader: Fred Piker
- April 30, 2013 -- **NATO**
Topic Leader: Tyler Beebe
- May 14, 2013 -- **China in Africa**
Topic Leader: Joe Adams

TODAY'S TOPIC

The March 19 meeting on Threat Assessment will follow more closely the original Great Decisions discussion format. More time will be spent on eliciting the ideas and opinions of the attendees on the content of the briefing book article and the questions it raises.

In preparation for the meeting:

1. Read the briefing book article on Threat Assessment.
2. Give some serious thought to the questions below.

Assessing the potential damage to the United States from the various threats it faces is important for setting the country's policy priorities. The advisory board to the Rand Corporation's Center for Global Risk and Security concludes that only one threat is existential. It is the threat of a disease pandemic. Interestingly, they assess America's fiscal imbalance and rising government debt level as "close to

existential". All the other threats evaluated by the advisory board were judged to be: "serious but not existential"-- including the rise of China, the Arab Spring, an Iranian nuclear weapon -- or "only inconvenient"-- including nuclear Korea, climate change, cyber threats.

- Do you agree with the authors' ranking of the importance of the threats?
- What changes in the ranking would you make? What threats would you add? What is your reasoning?
- Considering everything, is America more or less threatened today than during the Cold War?

The U.S. fiscal imbalance should be ranked near the top of the threat list because it reduces the resources available for national security and a foreign policy of U.S. engagement abroad. A former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs called the federal government's fiscal imbalance the nation's #1 national security threat. Moreover, the fiscal imbalance is only one symptom of a broader threat -- the incapability of the American political system to reach solutions to many of the nation's problems.

- Why have the differing political attitudes within the American electorate become so polarized and resistant to compromise?

This is a legitimate topic for a foreign policy discussion group because the fiscal imbalance is a result of the U.S. political system as well as economic factors. Yet, neither the briefing book nor the DVD addressed the subject. There is a pitfall we must avoid in proceeding on this topic. It would be unproductive for our discussion to degenerate into political partisanship and become only another example of the polarization we seek to analyze. Therefore, in discussing this subject we will follow the rule that there be no references to specific political parties or political personalities. After all, their actions are merely symptoms of the fundamental, underlying causes we want to discover. Consider the following questions.

- What are the historic and demographic causes of the different political attitudes within the American electorate?
- What accounts for the geographic differences in attitudes regarding the size and appropriate role of the Federal Government on the east and west coasts versus the plains and mountain states?
- Have economic class distinctions risen? Is this contributing to the polarization?

Certain conditions can amplify the different political attitudes which arise from fundamental factors and turn honest differences on issues into strident polarization. These include new communication technologies fueled by the system of campaign financing, Congressional redistricting, the primary election system.

- Why are the ratings of "editorialized news" catering to both ends of the political spectrum higher than the ratings of more fact based reporting?
- Can reform of our system of financing political campaigns be reconciled with the guarantee of free speech?
- Should the political influence on the redrawing of Congressional district boundaries be reduced by putting judges or bipartisan committees in charge?

- Should more political primary elections be open to independent voters as well as political party members?
- What other changes would reduce the polarization of our political system?