



The Future of Diplomacy

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An Interview with Christopher Moynihan and Mustafa Safdar
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Brown Journal of World Affairs: We are very interested in the Future of Diplomacy Project that you started at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. What new ideas does the project have about peace-building and diplomacy?

R. Nicholas Burns: Well, it's perhaps not surprising that a former diplomat would start a project called the Future of Diplomacy. I'm a former American diplomat, and I spent 27 years at the State Department. I'm now teaching foreign policy, international politics, and diplomacy at Harvard. I try to think about what the United States needs to do to maintain its global position and strength, especially at a time when we have the challenge of China and the challenge of a changing global world order. I look at the foundations of our power: the strength of our military, private sector, economy, and what my colleague Professor Joseph Nye has pioneered to call soft power, or smart power, which includes our values, history, and culture. It's anything from our entertainment industry to the strength of our universities. We also have diplomatic power. Yet diplomatic power, especially since 9/11, has been given much less attention in the last decade that it merits. We've tended since 9/11—especially in Iraq and

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Afghanistan—to focus on what we can do to resolve problems through the use of military force. I'm more interested in what we can do to outwit our adversaries and to use our diplomacy, negotiation, and statecraft to create global alliances to pursue the great challenges that are before us. I think any country has to have a balanced approach. If you think of it this way, we've fully funded the Pentagon since 9/11; we've fully funded the intelligence community; and we've created the Department of Homeland Security, a whole new department. Those are all the defensive parts of America. Those are the walls we built to protect ourselves.

There's also a fourth pillar of national strength, and it's our diplomatic strength. That's our offensive pillar. It allows us to go out and meet people and engage them and hopefully convince them through negotiations to be part of

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our coalitions, to be with us on climate change, or to be with us on countering terrorism. However, we have not fully funded our diplomacy through the State Department and USAID. The

Congress is just about to gut the State Department budget in the current mania of budget cutting that we're experiencing in 2011.

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I wanted to create a project that would support the value of diplomacy as a national instrument of the United States. It would teach diplomacy here at the Kennedy School, and it would bring in fellows. We've brought a lot of people in who help our students understand what diplomacy entails, and we sponsor books, articles, and speakers. There are very few centers of learning in the United States that focus on diplomacy, and we're one of the few so we're proud to do it.

Journal: What do you see as the role of non-state actors in diplomacy? Do you see a paradigm shift in how diplomacy is conducted from a state-to-state approach to a more multistakeholder one?

Burns: I do. We may be entering an era of a democratization of diplomacy, if you will. For all of human history, at least since states have evolved for several thousand years, diplomacy has been the preserve of nation-states. Certainly, I think diplomacy in its most classic form is going to continue at the national and international level to be very important. But in the last 30 or 40 years or so, I think we've seen the rise of the NGOs. We've seen non-state actors like NGOs—such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Amnesty International, and Save the Children who are all doing really important, valuable work—rep-





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resenting themselves and creating communities of people both in our country and internationally. It's very exciting, and it's very positive.

I think the biggest change in international politics in the last couple of decades has been the rise of NGOs all over the world especially in employment opportunities. When I was graduating from Boston College and from Johns Hopkins where I went to graduate school, I frankly never thought about working for an NGO because there just weren't that many. Most students then thought about working for the government or working for banks, investment firms, or law firms, but we certainly didn't think of creating our own NGOs, as some of our students at the Kennedy School are thinking of doing, or working for an NGO as my daughter did since graduating from college—she worked for Amnesty International.

I'm really intrigued by this development. It's almost entirely positive. Most of the NGOs worldwide are purposeful, positive, filling a niche where it needs to be filled, and doing work that maybe governments can't do or can't do well. It's become another dimension of diplomacy. The best example I can think of is the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which I believe is the wealthiest foundation in history. The work they've done on HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention and on malaria prevention is really path breaking and very important in the Caribbean, Central America, and in Africa, in particular. Frankly, they can bring a degree of resources to that work that most governments can't. They have more money than most governments, and they have a singular purpose. It's very impressive to watch that all happen. I am intrigued by the rise of NGOs. I teach a course here on diplomacy, and I mainly focus on state-to-state diplomacy and war and peace issues of the last 20 years. However, we do talk about the role of non-state actors like NGOs in modern-day diplomacy.

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Journal: Many credit the release of the WikiLeaks diplomatic cables with having increased government transparency throughout the world. How do you view the impact that WikiLeaks has had on diplomacy?

Burns: That's a very good question. This is a complicated and complex topic. As a former diplomat who spent nearly his entire career in government, on the one hand, I do think that in our democratic society it's really important that our government be as transparent and accountable to people as it can be. The foundation of democracy is that individual citizens understand what their government is doing in their name, and they understand both the strategy and the tactics of American foreign policy. I admire the fact that when President Obama





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came to office he essentially said that the government has classified information on a 30-year timeline and that we need to make more of what we do available to the American people. We should classify less and be more open so that the people of the United States understand what it is that Washington is doing. He pursued that initiative, and it's a good initiative. I'm all for transparency.

At the same time, governments have a need to keep secrets and governments have a right to keep secrets. Therefore, there will be a certain part of what the government does that citizens don't have a right to know about in our democracy. Let me give you an example. We have a system of codes and protection around our nuclear weapons. We don't want terrorists to get access to our nuclear weapons. We don't want foreign states to know the environment surrounding our nuclear weapons. I think most Americans would agree that they as individuals do not have a right to know our nuclear codes. I give this extreme example for one reason: to combat Julian Assange on his essential proposition, which is that government is up to no good and that he wants to expose it and everything that it does, as I understand his outlook. I've never met him, but that appears to be what he's trying to do. He has a supreme mistrust of our government particularly and of governments in general. He believes we have this right to know essentially everything that governments do. He acquired over 250,000 stolen cables that were confidential property of the United States government, and he put them on the Internet. I think that's wrong. I think he should be subject to criminal prosecution in our system because we have laws in this country that make it a criminal act to expose classified information to public view. I'm now a private citizen, and I know that there are some things that our government is doing that I shouldn't know about because the government can't be successful if we all know about all of its most sensitive dealings.

There are certain matters of secrecy in the modern world that the government has to deal with to be effective in protecting us and advancing our national goals. I'm completely comfortable with that. I very much trust our government. I worked for our government for a long time. It's a democratic government that is accountable to the people, and there are all sorts of checks and balances. We have obviously made some pretty serious mistakes that we have paid for from time to time. But for the most part, I trust our government to be the custodian of our most sensitive information, and I don't believe that as an American citizen I have the right to know everything our government is doing. In the twenty-first century, when we are dealing with issues such as the fight against terrorism, the government cannot make public everything we are doing or trying to do to stop Al Qaeda, or homegrown terrorist groups. For that reason, I find the

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WikiLeaks phenomenon to be very troubling to me as a citizen, and it is much too cynical about the role of government. Also, I distrust the motives of Julian Assange and his movement.

Journal: The Responsibility to Protect was used to justify the United States and NATO's military involvement in Libya. Has the United States set a dangerous precedent that it is obligated to intervene in every conflict of this nature—even those that do not directly benefit it? Should the Responsibility to Protect be extended to humanitarian crises?

Burns: It's a very difficult and complex issue. First of all, I very much support the concept of Responsibility to Protect. I thought it was a breakthrough when the United Nations agreed that this should be a part of the mission of the global community as represented by the UN. I think it was partly a reaction of people like Kofi Annan, who I think was a very good leader of the UN, to the mistakes we made in the past. This goes all the way to the Holocaust during World War II when the Roosevelt Administration was slow to react and in more modern times such as in Rwanda in 1994 where nearly a million people were killed and it became clear that genocide was occurring and we didn't intervene. In Bosnia, there was a four-and-a-half-year period that we didn't get involved where, I believe, up to 250,000 people were killed and 2 million made homeless, and we did not react to it as an international community. We let the warring parties tear that country apart until we finally, in the autumn of 1995, went in with a successful NATO intervention.

I think that the concept of Responsibility to Protect is very important in a modern world when authoritarian governments are preying upon their own people. There are times when that is so egregious that for moral and ethical reasons the international community has to step in and right wrongs.

You framed your question in a very good way. We can't intervene everywhere. There isn't enough political will, and there aren't enough soldiers or money to intervene everywhere. You do have to make choices. When do you decide to intervene and when do you not? I think it's been one of the central dilemmas of the Arab revolutions since last January. I don't see the NATO–United States intervention in Libya providing a template that would encourage further interventions in the short term. I'll tell you why.

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There were enough aspects of the Libyan revolution that were really unique that explained why we intervened. First, the Arab League requested a NATO military intervention, which was the first time it's ever done that and maybe the last time it'll ever do that. The Arab League essentially said, *please intervene in the internal affairs of one of our member states*. When are they ever going to say that again? This is because the Arab League had had it with Qaddafi, and knew that there was an impending, imminent humanitarian disaster, and that's the second factor. There was an imminent siege by Qaddafi's forces of Benghazi given the threats Qaddafi made and the actions Qaddafi's forces had taken. There was every reason to believe that there was going to be a bloodbath in Benghazi and that the only people who could stop it were the United States, Britain, and France. Third, the UN Security Council blessed a NATO intervention, so it had worldwide credibility. Fourth, there was an interest on the part of Britain and neighboring Mediterranean countries like France, Italy, and Spain. There was also a fifth factor: there was an armed rebel group on the ground willing to do most of the fighting—they just needed an air component. Those five factors put together explain the intervention in Libya.

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None of those five factors are present yet in Syria, Yemen, or Bahrain—places where there has been substantial violence. I don't think that there is reason to worry that the intervention in Libya or the concept of the Responsibility to Protect will suddenly create an America that will intervene every other week in an internal civil war. However, I do think it gives those in the international community who are responsible an avenue and a framework, which we can use when it is necessary to intervene for humanitarian purposes.

Journal: The United States didn't support the Egyptian protesters until it became clear that former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's rule was crumbling, took sides against Qaddafi in the civil war in Libya, and remained virtually silent about Bahrain's brutal crackdown on protesters. Do you think that President Obama's diplomatic response to the Arab Spring has been inconsistent?

Burns: I actually admire the way President Obama has acquitted himself on these Arab revolutions, and I'll tell you why. First, he's been able to signal to the people of the Arab world that the United States supports change. We support reform. We would like to see democracy and greater freedoms take root in the Middle East. We're not just going to stand till the last day with every one of these authoritarian regimes. On a regional basis, he's been able to signal, state, and articulate that clearly.

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Second, I think the President also understands that while there is this pan-Arab narrative of reform that unites the revolutions in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt in North Africa and on to the Levant, these are 22 different Arab countries and each is different historically and culturally. The revolutions will play out differently in each of those countries. He's been right to say, in addition to the pan-Arab narrative of reform, that there are 22 individual dramas taking place. The Arab revolution may be a five-act play, and it may take 20, 25, or 30 years to reach the end of the fifth act. We may be only witnessing the end of the first act.

What the President has done is to fashion individual responses to each of those revolutions. I thought the President actually acted—and I don't agree with the conventional criticism of him here—very rapidly to change a 30-year American policy of supporting Hosni Mubarak to disavowing him. I thought the President used his influence behind the scenes to encourage Mubarak to leave. That was the way to do it. Rather than stand on a soapbox, he worked behind the scenes quietly and nudged Mubarak using the influence that we have. I served as a young diplomat in Egypt in 1983–1985 in Cairo at the beginning of the Mubarak regime so I have known this entire period. For us, in a matter of a week, to decide that we were going to disavow a friend—Mubarak's been a very close friend of ours and a very strong partner of the United States—and to effectively throw our support behind the young people in Tahrir Square, I thought that was actually the government acting at warp speed. I don't agree with the criticism that somehow the President dithered and took too long to make this decision. I think he had a very sophisticated, nuanced, and skillful reaction to these Arab revolutions. He declined to intervene militarily or politically in Bahrain or Yemen. He did intervene in Egypt, certainly politically, and in Libya very quickly to support the reform forces. I think he's done very well. Now, we're only at the end of act one, perhaps, so it's too early for a real assessment. This is a fast-moving tsunami of change through the Arab world. It's going to be fascinating to see what's ahead.

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Journal: Why has the normative principle that a regime has lost legitimacy after committing a high level of violence against its citizenry gained traction in the Middle East? The Arab League backed intervention in Libya and is considering suspending Syria's membership for this very reason. Should countries like Saudi Arabia and Jordan be held now to this same norm?





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Burns: That's a really good question. I think we're seeing the tension, which goes back to the founding of our republic, between our values and our concrete interests. We have a lot at stake in the Arab revolutions. We are a country founded on freedom, liberty, and democracy. We want that for other people, so part of what is motivating President Obama, I'm sure, is a very sincere and heartfelt support for young people who are demonstrating peacefully and idealistically for change because they live in a region that has only known authoritarianism. On the other hand, we have some concrete interests tied up in those authoritarian regimes: free flow of oil and gas to Europe, Asia, and North America; the support of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the U.A.E. for our efforts against terrorist groups like Al Qaeda; and the support of the Gulf sheikdom for efforts to contain Iranian power. These are critical American interests—these aren't just important—they are vital American interests. This is why the President's job is so tough in foreign policy. You have these competing demands. They are contradictory in some ways in a place like Bahrain, and they are tugging at each other.

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The President has this lonely responsibility to decide when do we weigh in on behalf of values and democracy, and when do we weigh in on behalf of stability to support the Saudis. This is a very difficult balance to get right. I tell my students that they should see the President as actively trying to balance these issues. He certainly chose our values in Egypt over stability. You saw the attack on the President in our own country from people who said he was disavowing a friend, Hosni Mubarak. We need Egypt's army to help us police the Middle East and yet at that point the President took a leap into the unknown by supporting these young people in the streets of Cairo without knowing whether they could ever form a democratic government. On the other hand, while we were critical of the excesses of the Bahraini government against its own people—and it was unjust what happened—these were largely peaceful Shiite protestors in Pearl Square that were brutalized by their own government. We criticized that but didn't put our full weight behind it. We didn't seek in any way to punish the Bahraini government with sanctions because Bahrain is so important to Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabia is so important to us. For these concrete reasons, I think the President is going to have to make individual decisions on a country-by-country basis as this drama proceeds as to when our values take precedence in our policies and when our interests do.

I see that as a choice that is common to foreign policy. I don't see the President acting in a hypocritical fashion. I don't think it's inconsistent because all those interests are important. In some places, security interests will be the

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most prominent and the priority. In other cases, you have to stand with people in the streets in support of democratic rights. I think it's a very difficult juggling and balancing act. He has done pretty well in a very difficult and fast-moving environment, which is really uncharted. It's a situation we've never been in before, and I admire the way the President has acquitted himself.

Journal: The United States has made it clear that any new Egyptian government must honor the Egypt–Israel peace treaty. Does the Egyptian government have the right to abrogate the treaty if doing so reflects the popular will of the country? How can the United States push its agenda without appearing to interfere with a nation's internal sovereignty?

Burns: I think we have to expect as Americans that if democracy comes to some of these Middle East countries—and we all should hope that it does, particularly in Egypt, which is the largest and most important of the Arab countries—that the internal politics of that new democratic state are going to have a big impact on its foreign policy. The Egyptian government will now for the first time have the kind of politics we have. They will have pressure from NGOs and interest groups and from political parties perhaps to change their policy toward the United States and toward Israel. We have to respect the fact that democratic governments will face those pressures that are natural in democratic societies.

Having said that, it would surprise me very much if any future Egyptian government decided to abrogate the peace treaty with Israel. That government would have the right to do that. Any government has the right to abrogate a treaty of international law. No one is contesting that. The question is whether it would be sensible to abrogate that treaty, and it seems unlikely given the fact that Israel is the strongest military power in the Middle East and peace has been such a benefit to the Egyptian people who fought the wars of 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973. Egypt suffered greatly in all those wars and, in my view, most Egyptians will say that they may not agree with Israel on many matters, but it is in their interest to keep a peace treaty with Israel. The treaty was signed in March of 1979 when I was in graduate school a long time ago, and it's the foundation and building block of a stable Middle East. Without it, the Middle East would be in chaos and so it is very much in the American interest to convince Egypt and Israel to maintain that treaty. My guess is that even if you see an Islamist party come to power in Egypt, they will not abrogate the peace treaty with Israel. They may have a rocky relationship with Israel and a lot of disagreements, but I don't think the treaty will be abrogated. That would put





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Egypt in uncharted waters.

Journal: Iran just announced that it was reconsidering its cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) after the agency published a report Iran deems “political motivated.” With Russia and China ready to block UN sanctions on Iran, what should the United States do?

Burns: I’ll try to distill a complex subject down into a couple of reasonable points. First, there is a real, genuine, and pernicious threat from Iran. In my judgment of the country, the Iranian government is determined to create a nuclear weapons capability. It is the leading funder and supporter of terrorist groups against the United States, Israel, and moderate Arabs in the Middle East. It has been our adversary in both Iraq and in Afghanistan and has made life for us very difficult in both places. There is a radical, revolutionary, anti-democratic, and brutal government in Tehran. For those reasons, I think all of us need to be very concerned that Iran does not become the strongest military power in the Middle East.

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Second, if you take the first of those assumptions, what do we do about it? We do have a much stronger military than Iran does and Israel does too. It makes sense to keep the threat of military force on the table and openly visible to the Iranians because the leadership of Iran is cynical and hard-nosed. They’ll respect power, and I think it would be very much to our disadvantage if we avowed that we would never use force against this particular government. There may be a reason for us to do so in the near future. Having said that, I don’t think this is the time to use force against Iran. I think President Bush and President Obama have followed essentially a single integrated strategy for the last five years. I was President Bush’s point person for the first three years: 2006, 2007, and early 2008. That policy has been that we would like to negotiate our differences with Iran. We’d like to try to reason with them. We’d like to work out a settlement of our disagreements with them that would end up with Iran not becoming a nuclear weapons power. If it’s not possible to negotiate with them—and Iran has turned down both President Bush and President Obama—we’ll have no choice but to sanction them.

To me, a sensible strategy is pursuing that two-track strategy of trying to negotiate and then sanctioning. The IAEA report of last week is very troubling. It indicates that Iran is racing ahead toward a nuclear weapons capability, and they are testing technologies that can only be used in the construction of a nuclear device. They have no other conceivable purpose, so I believe the IAEA

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report has great credibility internationally. It's not written by the U.S. government. It's written by the United Nations, and it's as hard-hitting as these kinds of reports come. However, the sanctions now need to be strengthened. I hope the administration will consider sanctions against the Iranian central bank and further financial sanctions that will hinder the ability of the Iranian government to launder its money through our banking system and to use the international banking system, in essence, to aid its own nuclear development program. We should stop that by toughening the sanctions. I think we should remain open to negotiations not because we like this government—we don't. We detest this government. Yitzhak Rabin, a very tough-minded person, said you don't negotiate with your best friends—you negotiate with your enemies. The salient fact is that we haven't had a sustained conversation between the American and Iranian governments since the late 1970s—30 years—three decades.

For me, the idea that you might go to war with a country yet you know nothing about its leadership, nothing about whether or not a peaceful resolution may or may not be possible because you haven't tested that proposition in direct negotiation is criminal. I very much support President Obama in trying to negotiate and in keeping that option open, but the Iranians have been the ones who said no to it. Finally, what should we then do? I would follow the Obama/Bush path of the last five years, strengthen the sanctions, try to negotiate, and build up the defenses of our Gulf partners (Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Kuwait, and Bahrain) so that we essentially can put in a containment policy to surround Iran with American and Arab military power to cut off any possibility that Iran can use its own military power for pernicious purposes. I would not use military force at the present time, but we can hold that in reserve and keep it open as a possibility should Iran threaten or attack any of its Middle Eastern neighbors that are friends of ours. We are stronger than Iran. We can outlast them. They have no legitimacy internationally; we have a lot. We should create a major international coalition to contain Iranian power. I think that's a better way to go rather than the United States attacking militarily with no assurance that the use of military force would actually answer the problem we are trying to solve.

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Journal: Is there a tradeoff between engaging Iran diplomatically and keeping the threat of military power visible to the Iranians? For example, we are occupying neighboring Iraq, have military bases scattered throughout the region, and have 100,000 troops in Afghanistan. Iran does seem surrounded. Are these actions





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detering Iran's willingness to engage?

Burns: I would create a containment strategy that was quite explicit and overt; a rough analogy—one that is imperfect historically—is our policy toward the Soviet Union. We were prepared to fight. We effectively drew a line in the sand. We didn't want to fight. We kept the peace for over 50 years during the Cold War, but we were prepared to deploy American forces to oppose any Soviet Invasion of West Germany, Italy, or Turkey during the Cold War. We have the

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same type of framework in place where we protect Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Israel from any kind of Iranian aggression. The United States is

so much stronger militarily and politically than the Iranians are. We should use that force artfully. I fear an Israeli attack. I have great sympathy with the Israeli predicament on Iran. The Israelis have an absolute right to be concerned about the intentions of the Iranian government given Israeli and Jewish history and the open threats that have been made by President Ahmadinejad. Yet, I think that an Israeli use of force at this time would produce the possibility of a third major land war in the Middle East, one in which we might lose the support of individual average Arabs because they might choose to defend another Muslim country even if that country is represented by the despicable government of Iran. I just don't think the use of military force can resolve the problem at this time. Airstrikes aren't going to completely erase the ability of the Iranian government to enrich and convert uranium and master the fuel cycle en route to a nuclear capability. I think using the threat of force, sanctions, and diplomacy is a much smarter strategy than using force at the present time.

Journal: Would you apply the same strategy of containment to a country like North Korea, which is more isolated than Iran?

Burns: I think we're trying to. The problem with North Korea is that it has a nuclear capability. The other problem with North Korea is that it is run by a gangster family in power since 1950. The dictator there is about to hand off power to his unemployed 28-year-old son who has never held a real job. This kid, Kim Jong-un, is going to be the proud owner of a nuclear weapons capacity. We don't want to live in this kind of world. We have to support the six-party talks in which the five countries—China, South Korea, Japan, Russia, and the United

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States—are pressuring North Korea. The problem with North Korea is that it has nuclear weapons, and there is a much more unstable regime in Pyongyang than in Tehran. There is probably more to worry about in North Korea in the short term. If you were to compare the two in the short term, they are both of concern, but the greater concern is probably with North Korea.

Journal: Let's move to the financial and political crisis in Greece. As the former ambassador to Greece, do you believe that it and other nations with unstable economies should be allowed to leave the eurozone or even be forced out—a question that until recently was not even being considered.

Burns: What happens in Europe is of profound importance to the United States. Europe is one of our largest trading partners. We have a very large investment relationship with Europe. Twenty-six American allies in NATO are European countries. While it is fashionable to now say that the future is in Asia—and in many respects it is—and we do need to be more Asia-Pacific-oriented, we can't forget how many vital interests economically and strategically we have tied up in Europe. This eurozone crisis has been unfolding and evolving for about a year and a half since the spring of 2010. I never imagined a year and a half ago that it would spiral to such a critical point. While it's not likely that the eurozone will collapse, it is possible. It's possible that the European Union will be fundamentally weakened by these events. It is possible not only that Greece might default but also that Italy could default. What happens in this crisis will have a major impact on our economy, and it could be in a negative direction, unfortunately, if events spin out of control in Europe. The Europeans are going to have to think hard how they have organized themselves because clearly right now Greece cannot be kicked out of the eurozone. Greece would have to agree to its own expulsion, and it's not likely to do that. How do you maintain the integrity of your currency if certain members of that currency block are in default to their debtors? The Greek crisis was one thing, and it was very important. However, the Italy crisis and a potential crisis in France are far more important because of the size of their economies. Italy is the third largest economy in the EU, and Italy has one of the largest bond markets in the world. The country to watch is Italy. I think it will go along way to answering your question of whether Europe will survive in its present form in this particular economic and currency crisis. 



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