

Q&A: Congressman Eliot Engel

Contributed by PT Editors
Monday, 09 October 2006

New York Congressman Eliot Engel's international relations experience is both broad and deep. Arriving on the Hill before the fall of the Berlin Wall, he has seen our foreign policy evolve from "Cold War" to "peace dividend" and now into the "War on Terror." PT talked at length with the Congressman about the shifting contours of our foreign policy and what we can do better.

PT: Over your time in Washington, how have the dynamics of the debate shifted with respect to foreign policy? For example, what was that interim period like—between the fall of the Berlin Wall and September 11th? In the absence of a "foil," what brought cohesion to so many disparate policies?

Engel: I think there was less controversy. During the Cold War era, there was a debate between those with strict anti-communist attitudes and those who felt we should have more rapprochements with the Soviet Union. Since 2001, Iraq has really been the new cleavage in American foreign policy. There are those who feel we never should have been involved, those who initially supported it and now have doubts, and those who initially supported the war and still do. But that period prior to September 11th, I don't think there were tremendous amounts of disagreement in the foreign policy sphere, and that lack of fundamental disagreement lent cohesion to the process in itself.

PT: You mentioned the phase we're in now—combating terrorism worldwide—being the driving force of our contemporary foreign policy. Are there certain drawbacks to crafting policy under such a vague umbrella? Are there ever policies that don't necessarily fit within the parameters of the "War on Terror" that are nonetheless folded in?

Engel: Of course, many Democrats feel that the executive branch has used the "War on Terror" as an excuse to do whatever it wants. They've used the resolution passed by Congress authorizing the president to go to war as a sort of catch-all. The administration takes the view that it is within the president's authority to do whatever it takes to combat terrorism, and it is also within his authority to determine what that means. Many Democrats—and some Republicans—have a problem with this because it essentially abrogates the checks and balances in our system.

We have obligations as the world's primary superpower, but those obligations do not require us to simply cede power to whomever happens to be sitting in the White House. When our founding fathers crafted the Constitution, they were very careful to incorporate those checks and balances for a reason. On principle, regardless of who the president is, we must maintain these tenets of our Constitution. This is what many of us have problems with: we agree with the war on terror, we fight the war on terror, we want to be supportive of the President of the United States, but we find it difficult to abrogate our responsibilities as a co-equal branch of the government by just saying, "OK, whatever you deem Mr. President, that's fine with us."

PT: Tell us about the climate within our international relations committees. Does it ever feel like a zero-sum game, that if something doesn't fall within the auspices of the "War on Terror," then that aspect of our foreign policy will thereby be somewhat neglected?

Engel: I think many elements of our foreign policy are being neglected, but that's primarily because of the decision to go to war in Iraq. I'm specifically concerned with the situation in Afghanistan. We had nearly unanimous approval of Congress for the operation in Afghanistan, yet everything I hear and have been told suggests that we are on the verge of collapse there. People can argue whether the war in Iraq was or is relevant to the war on terrorism, but nobody can argue that the war in Afghanistan wasn't central to that fight. If we lose Afghanistan, it would just go to show that we've been too bogged down in Iraq and focused on the situation there.

This is precisely why I believe that the leaders of countries like North Korea and Iran, and to a lesser extent Venezuela, are poking fingers in our eyes on the world stage. They know that we're paper tigers. There's very little we can do—particularly with respect to North Korea and to Iran—other than rhetoric. And they know it. That's why these regimes are as belligerent as they are, because they know our hands are somewhat tied.

PT: You're a member of the subcommittee on emerging threats. Could you tell us a little more about how you pinpoint and define an "emerging threat," and whether it has to do with isolating the catalysts for extremism such as poverty, poor education, weak state institutions, etc.? Following that, how does Congress address these concerns?

Engel: I'm afraid that very little is being done proactively. We are reacting to things that break out instead of trying to prevent them from breaking out. Part of the reason for that is that we only have so many resources and we can only be in so many places at any one time. Of course, when our resources are sapped by an action like Iraq, these other developing problems go untended. By not acting, we are sowing the seeds for crises one, two decades from now. We're not doing anything to prevent it because at this moment, frankly, we just can't.

PT: Let's pretend the situation in Iraq doesn't exist—we never invaded and it's not an issue. What types of things would you envision us doing to stem those burgeoning crises then?

Engel: Without the enmity caused by the Iraq war, we would have had the opportunity to work with other countries to try to eradicate some of the poverty that breeds radicalism. We know that certain things can only be decided with strong U.S. intervention, but we just haven't had the ability to do that because of our decisions on Iraq. Now, if we aren't successful in Iraq, we're faced with a whole set of new problems.

PT: Do states like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia present special challenges when determining U.S.

policy? The president has said that "We won't distinguish between terrorists and the states that harbor them," but both of these countries seem to walk a fine line.

Engel: Pakistan is a very strange anomaly, because tacitly, they're aligned with us in the war on terror. On the other hand, they play duplicitous games; there's a porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan that we believe Osama bin Laden is hiding in—we don't know which side, but we suppose it's Pakistan—and the Pakistani government doesn't really do what we'd like it to do in terms of actively going after Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. There's also a feeling that many of the people in the Pakistani intelligence service are aligned with the warlords who support the Taliban and provide sanctuary to Osama bin Laden and others. Now, maybe Musharraf needs to do that in order to survive. Maybe if he were more aggressive he would run the risk of assassination or a coup, so he's doing a delicate balancing act. The general feeling is that while the situation may not be perfect, it's better than the alternative. I'm sure there are even other things going on behind the scenes in which Musharraf is helping us with covert actions or whatever, but my feeling is that the Pakistani government is not doing enough and we should push them to do more.

PT: With respect to our "problematic allies," how can we better pressure them to help us combat terrorism?

Engel: My feelings on this have really evolved over the past year or so. I used to be strongly in favor of clamping down on countries like Saudi Arabia that played both sides. They are supposedly our allies in the war against terrorism, yet they are the major benefactors of the terrorists and they've refused to crack down on the madrassahs that preach the vilest anti-American, anti-Israel, anti-western doctrine. Yet they're ostensibly our ally in the war against terror. I am annoyed with that attitude.

On the other hand, I temper that feeling with caution about what you wish for. We've toppled Saddam Hussein—and he was terrible—but what do we have in his place? Are our interests and the Iraqi people better off with the current regime or him? From a strategic point of view, I think the answer is "no." Strategically, he was a bulwark against Iran, and now we have a major problem involving Iran's nuclear ambitions and this lunatic Ahmadinejad. So, the question is, "Did we cut off our nose to spite our face?"

We have a situation in Lebanon where Hezbollah is growing stronger and stronger. We've been pressuring Mubarak in Egypt to liberalize and democratize. But what good is it if someone

like Mubarak—who is far from perfect—is voted out, and he is replaced by the Muslim Brotherhood or some other Islamic regime? What good would it do us if the Saudi royal family was deposed and we ended up with a theocracy similar to the one in Iran?

I no longer buy it that we have to spread democracy and that's our main goal. My attitude is that I couldn't care less about creating stable democracies in the Middle East anymore. I'm concerned with containing and combating terrorism. It is the main battle we are faced with in the 21st century, and everything we do as a nation in terms of foreign policy must be directed toward that purpose.

PT: Congressman, thank you for your time.

Congressman Eliot Engel represents New York's 17th congressional district. He serves on the International Relations Committee and as the Ranking Member on the House International Relations Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere. He also serves as Vice Chair of the Democratic Task Force on Homeland Security.