Elite Perceptions of the United States in Europe and Asia

Xenia Wickett
Project Director, US and Dean, Academy for Leadership in International Affairs, Chatham House

David C Speedie
Director, US Global Engagement Programme; Senior Fellow, Carnegie Council

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Good evening, and welcome to the Carnegie Council. I am David Speedie, director of the programme in US global engagement.

I am delighted today to welcome a friend and former colleague, Xenia Wickett. Xenia is the director of the US programme and acting dean of the Academy of Leadership and International Affairs at Chatham House, the foremost think tank in the United Kingdom. Before that, she was executive director for the PeaceNexus Foundation in Switzerland. She was at Harvard's Belfer Center at the Kennedy School, where she was executive director for research and director for the project in India and South Asia and also a member of the board. She was director for South Asia at the US National Security Council (NSC). She was a foreign affairs officer in the Bureau of South Asia at US State Department, et cetera, et cetera. The qualifications are too long to read.

You have done it all, and now welcome to the Carnegie Council.

Xenia Wickett

I haven't done this yet.

David Speedie

You haven't done this yet, but you're about to, I'm glad to say.

David Speedie

It's timely that Xenia should be here, because Chatham House just produced a few months ago a report on elite perceptions of the United States in Europe and Asia. With the headlines that are ubiquitous in our newspapers from a few months ago and not quite so prominent today, Ukraine, with the P5+1 negotiations with Iran going on in Geneva, and, of course, gravely these days, with the ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) threat in Syria and Iraq, obviously, we do not, as the old saying goes, have our troubles to look for. That's why this study of how the United States is dealing with these and other situations is, as I say, all the more timely.

President Obama in his speech to the United Nations last month said, 'We come together at a crossroads between war and peace, between disorder and integration, between fear and hope.' That's a pretty good summary of an unruly world.

Let me begin, Xenia, by asking you about the structure and the parameters of the study itself. I was interested that you chose essays instead of interviews from participants. How many were there? How geographically widespread was this? Who was chosen, from what disciplines?

Xenia Wickett

We spent probably six to eight months trying to figure out what we should do. We debated whether we should do interviews, whether we should do questions and answers, structured questions, essays—how we should go about this.

Of course, as we all know, there are vast numbers of general public polling about how people see the United States, whether it's by the German Marshall Fund, whether it's by Pew. What we were trying to do
is grasp something different. We were trying to grasp (a) what elites thought, rather than what the general public thought; and we wanted to get beyond what the general public polling was. The general public polling tells you people like America more or they like America less. What they don’t tell you is why they like America more or like America less. They don’t tell you how we make those decisions. Is it because we like the president? Is it because we like the local policies?

So we tried to do something different. Essentially, we said we wanted to reach out to people in what was originally six countries in Asia, six countries in Europe, but ended up being seven countries in Europe, and we wanted to talk to people in four sectors. We looked at the public sector, the formal public sector, the private sector, we looked at media, and we looked at think tanks and academia.

In each of those sectors we reached out to anywhere from between four and fifteen people, in each of those four sectors, in each of those countries, and we said to them, ‘We don’t want you to tell us what the polling in your country says. We don’t want you to tell us what the general public says. We want you to tell us what you think. We want personal statements from the heart. What do you think about the United States, and why do you think those things? Do you like America or do you not like America? Do you like America’s policies, do you not like America’s policies?’

Instead of giving them structured questions, we essentially gave them a paragraph up front, saying, ‘What do you think, and why? Is it because you’re looking at the president and your views of the president? Is it because you’re looking at America’s policy? Is it America’s culture?’

We tried to grasp personal statements, because we really wanted to get this idea of what’s going on inside, rather than what the numbers are telling us. To varying degrees, we succeeded. If you look at the report itself, there are some incredibly powerful statements.

One that I like to talk about: One Greek individual sent us photos of the US embassy back in the 1960s and sent us photos of the US embassy today and said, ‘I remember driving past the embassy when I was a child, and it was this open green space. It was this welcoming environment. You drive past it now, and you’ve got barriers and you’ve got policemen. That says it all.’

This was the kind of thing—incredibly powerful statements. Unfortunately, of course, they were done confidentially, so all we have in the report are little snippets that we think are particularly powerful that say it far better than I could.

David Speedie

One of the things that comes across in the report is distinct differences between perceptions in Europe and Asia. Let’s focus on Europe for a moment.

There was a basket of responses of particular interest to us as the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs that spoke about the issues of moral leadership, the decline of US values, a dichotomy between US words and deeds, diminishing US influence. I don’t know if that meant a sense of a new isolationism. Speak a little about that particular strand of response that seemed to pervade some European answers.

Xenia Wickett
It was fascinating. Let me start, if I may, with kind of the punch line that I took away from everything you have just said. The punch line wasn't so much to me that Europeans are disappointed with where America is today. They don't see—and again and again we heard this—the shining ‘city on a hill.’ That no longer exists in their minds in the same way as it did historically.

That to me wasn't the punch line. The punch line to me was the fact that Europeans desperately wanted that America back. It was the sense, not just that they had lost America, the moral leadership of America, that America's values had, not disappeared, but were disappointing perhaps, but it was actually the sense of ‘Oh, please, where can we re-find that America?’ which I think is incredibly powerful, that sends a message, to me, to American policymakers that they need to find a way to get that back.

Now, let me put a little footnote on that, though. I do question whether this idea of loss of American leadership, this idea of America's shining city on a hill is one in our dreams. I wonder whether, like us all, we look back in history and history was always so much more peaceful, so much more glowing. Everybody was nicer than they are today. Everybody was kinder than they are today. We were all far more altruistic.

So I do worry that a lot of this—this is more about our memories are glowing, and, of course, today is ever-present and painful.

But nevertheless, there is this idea that (a) America's moral leadership is gone or is going—not gone, but going—and (b) they desperately want it back.

Another little tidbit on that—and I think you are seeing that today in many of the things that are going on in the world—the real sense that without American moral leadership, they can't lead, the desire for America to take leadership so they can follow and they can promote this idea. But without America, they won't be able to do it.

David Speedie

Did this come across, in any way, more so—I think it was Donald Rumsfeld who spoke of ‘new Europe’ and ‘old Europe’—was this more pervasive in any part of Europe?

Xenia Wickett

It was broadly across Europe, and that's very different—and we can get on to Asia in a second—a very different sentiment from Asia. Yes, nuances throughout Europe, but I would say, more broadly, Eastern Europe, in some sense, remembers it all too fondly—a lot of going back to the Marshall Plan, to World War II, to the sense that America was so altruistic then—now, I will debate that—and where is that today.

So I think there is some nuance, but broadly writ, it's across Europe.

The only other thing I would say—and again I'm putting a little footnote to this with my kind of policy hat on—I do wonder again whether we don't question what those values are. President Obama was in London in May 2011, which was just literally months after I moved back to London. He stood in the Houses of Parliament and talked about the mutual values, the common values, that the United States and the UK hold. David Cameron, Prime Minister Cameron, comes here and he talks about the common values.

What I find interesting about this is that nobody talks about what exactly are those values. We talk about there being a common set of values, but I think we do need to sometimes dig a little bit deeper as to, really, are they common values? To me, there are differences in the nuance. As somebody who has lived
on both sides of the Atlantic, who is both British and American, there are interesting disparities there I think we need to pay attention to.

**David Speedie**

It's like being asked to define a word and you say, 'Yes, I know what that word means', and then when you actually have to define it, you're grasping. Yes, exactly.

Let's move to Asia, then. Obviously, one of the capstones of the second Obama administration would be the so-called pivot to Asia. Of course, a pivot to something means a pivot away from something else, in this case, I suppose, Europe. So let's keep that idea in the back of the mind.

In terms of this so-called pivot to Asia, there's also the question of how that was received in 'Asia', because Asia is an awfully big place. For example—'rebalancing' is another word that has been used; I think it appears in the report—how the Chinese may view the pivot to Asia, how our traditional allies, Japan, Korea—and, of course, there are tensions among our allies, Japan, South Korea, and so on. Does India feel part of the pivot to Asia? You're an India specialist.

In the course of a few precious minutes, how do you capture this complex picture of the Asian response?

**Xenia Wickett**

You talk to anybody who was in the administration in the first term—you talk to Kurt Campbell, who was the assistant secretary for East Asia-Pacific, you talk to the folks at the NSC—and they will all kind of sigh and put their heads in their hands when you talk about the pivot: ‘That was a mistake’: not the strategy. The strategy was the right strategy; the language was the wrong strategy, which is, of course, why they stopped using the word ‘pivot’ and they started using the word ‘rebalancing’, because, of course, as you say, a pivot towards is a pivot away. The intent was to say it’s not a pivot away. We can do more than one thing.

Today’s critique is, as I heard somebody say about a year ago, with Secretary Kerry, are we pivoting from the pivot? So we are pivoting away from the pivot to Asia. Are we now pivoting towards the Middle East, away from the pivot in Europe? Very confusing.

In my view—and I spend a lot of time working on Asia, and we have done a lot of work, separate from this, on Asia—the pivot is real and the pivot continues to be real. What is changing is that the pivot is no longer, and in fact never really was, a military pivot, which is, of course, to what this study reflects, what many Asian allies want to see. They want to see a military pivot. It’s not a military pivot. It’s a military, diplomatic, economic, norms-building pivot. It is far broader than that. The TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership), this big trade deal between the Pacific partnership, principally the United States and Japan negotiating at the moment, but many of the Asian states, the United States and others—Mexico, Canada—this is economic. That’s going to be the big Asian policy of this term, assuming we manage to pull it off.

So the pivot very much is existing. You asked what the Asian states feel about it. Unlike European countries that really focus on America’s values, Asian countries are focusing on America’s hard power, America’s military power. What that means is that they look at the pivot and they say, ‘Where’s the pivot? We don’t see more troops. We don’t see more ships. We don’t see more planes. We don’t see a pivot.’
In fact, the pivot has backfired in many respects, because America's allies don't see it and then are asking, 'Why is the rhetoric different from the action? We don't feel any more secure. In fact, we feel more insecure, because now no longer is America reliable, because it's saying one thing and it appears to be doing something else, at least in the military scene.'

At the same time, it has worried China, which they really don't want. China is saying, 'Wait a sec. You're coming into our space. You shouldn't be coming into our space.'

Actually, what has happened, because it wasn't well-explained—it was the right strategy, badly explained, as a result of which you have a lot of nervous characters in Asia today, which weren't necessarily necessary.

David Speedie

And, of course, in the hard military sense, the new split, the 60-40, is somewhat illusory because of budget cuts in the military.

Xenia Wickett

Because of budget cuts. So the whole size of the military has decreased. Even though 60 percent of American forces, naval forces, are going to be in the Pacific versus 40 percent in the Atlantic, which was a 50-50 split previously, because of the pie shrinking, that's not more troops.

David Speedie

I don't know if this is a generic question. I can't remember if this is particular to either Europe or Asia or both. What I found interesting was that words that came through in the report in terms of U.S foreign policy were 'unpredictable,' 'unreliable,' even 'hypocritical,' all sort of leading towards a sense of uncertainty about American policy. But what also surprised me in the report were some of the statistics about the popularity of the United States in the world, which was a little counterintuitive. You hear about single-digit approval ratings, and yet you quoted the Pew Global Attitudes Project surveying 39 countries that a median of 63 percent of all participants held favorable views of the United States. Some of these figures were really quite high. It's lowest, obviously, in the greater Middle East.

Again, I realize this was not a public opinion survey. But I'm wondering how these rather better-than-what-we-might-have-expected came through in the responses from your elite group.

Xenia Wickett

Mostly, the elites and the public overlap. There are exceptions. Values is a place where, when you talk about American values in Europe, the public will say, actually, 'We're not that interested in American values.' You have to remember, we were doing this study right in the middle or just after the NSA (National Security Agency) revelations came out, the Snowden revelations. So you can imagine the kind of rhetoric—and I'm sure you saw the kind of rhetoric—that was coming out of the United Kingdom, Germany in particular, France, and others.

So the public don't seem to hold American values with the same high regard, if you will, that the elites do. So there are differences between the elites and the public.
But broadly writ, your numbers of approvals—one of the things I find fascinating—no great surprise; Pakistan's approval rating of the United States is in the single digits or very, very low double digits. France's, Germany's, oddly enough to a lesser degree; the United Kingdom's are in the 70s and 80s. Some of the results are actually not such a surprise.

I think it's Pew that does an interesting study where they ask three different questions: What are your views of President Obama and, before that, President Bush? What are your views of American policy? What are your views of America?

Actually, interestingly, you get different answers, depending on what comes out. One of the things that came out of our study was policy. Of course, lots of people look at America's policy. If you're in the Europe or the United States, they look at different policies. Interestingly, we have long known that foreign policy is domestic policy. For Europeans, domestic policy is foreign policy. When they talk about America being hypocritical, they are talking not just about Guantanamo and Afghanistan and Iraq. They are talking about the death penalty. They are talking about the level of poverty in this country. They are talking about abortion rights; gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender rights. They're talking about American domestic policy and saying, how can you promote this and do this?

If you're in Asia, they don't care about domestic policy. They're not watching America's domestic policy. They're not even watching, for the main part, America's global policy. If you're in Pakistan, they care about what your policy towards Pakistan is and maybe towards India and the border region.

So very, very different outlooks. That's the nuance that you get from this, where if you look at just the raw numbers on Pakistan approval ratings or Germany approval ratings, you don't get into that.

David Speedie

Another thing I found arresting was that, as you have just said, it's not just American policy, but America itself. Let me read a quote from the report: ‘Across the board, elites view US business in a more positive light than they do the US government. Given this, it would be advantageous to the United States for its government, wherever possible, to support the ability of these non-state actors to advance US values and expand people-to-people links.’

Please elaborate on that a little bit.

Xenia Wickett

Sure. There were two results that were really interesting that were less about how people saw America, but more about how their views were formed. One of them is, across the board in all of these four sectors—public sector, private sector, media, and think tank/academic communities—all of them, across the board, put American business above everything else, in Asia and in Europe—this idea that American business is so strong, so powerful, something to emulate. Then, if you want to take one step beyond, it wasn't just American businesses; it was American entrepreneurs, American innovation. So, really, it's that sector above everything else that everybody can agree upon is incredibly powerful and, as I say, something to emulate, as opposed to the government.

That was one result. So you kind of say, if you are the US government, actually, the diplomats—sorry to say this—are able to do a less effective job at promoting what is respected, what is loved about the United
States than maybe American businessmen, and particularly American entrepreneurs. A little controversial, but nevertheless.

The other thing that was interesting—and this is linked to that idea—is that experience in America or with American businesses or with Americans is an incredibly powerful way to affect the way people think. Again, this has policy implications. Post-9/11, we absolutely restricted our visa regime. My argument is, that is the worst thing that we could possibly do. If, actually, people’s views are made so powerfully by interaction with Americans or in America, then we should be trying to get more and more people coming here, and we should be sending our businesses out so they interact with more and more Americans than they do today.

So there are a couple of things where you look at the results of this and you say, ‘Well, I hate to say it, but our policy is working in a way that is antithetical to our interests.’

**David Speedie**

It occurred to me also in reading this—and this may be an unfair question to put you on the spot—the notion of if anything has happened in the interim since this report several months ago that might either reinforce the general sense of this or challenge some assumptions. Hong Kong comes to mind. Obviously this happened recently. It seems to be petering out somewhat, but clearly it joined the world protest movements for a moment. How do you think people might have responded differently?

**Xenia Wickett**

Let me identify something that we haven’t spoken about yet, which is American decline. Of course, the American declinist debate has been going on for decades, certainly fairly powerful over the last decade, particularly powerful since 2008 and the economic downturn. Since 2008, there have been an awful lot of people around the world who say America is a declining power; China is on the rise, GDP surpassing the United States. If you poll people in the United States, a majority now will tell you that China already is more powerful economically than the United States. If you poll people in China—it’s fascinating.

Europeans say the declinist debate is vastly overwrought, whereas Asians say actually there’s something in this declinist debate. I can argue that part of that is—as I was saying earlier, the Asians look at America’s military and they are disappointed with America’s military in terms of their alliance structures. So they see America in decline. Europeans, because they look at values, maybe see it slightly differently.

But this declinist debate, particularly given what’s going on with Ukraine and Russia today and if you look at what’s going on in Hong Kong with China, it does raise these questions in people's minds in Europe. This declinist debate is kind of back again. In some respects, it has diminished.

If you sit in Europe, as I do, you look at America’s GDP growth and you look at Europe’s GDP growth and you look at China’s slowing GDP growth—still fast surpassing that of the United States, but it’s heading in the wrong direction—there are a lot of people who question now what’s going on. But you look at America’s—I will use either ‘unwillingness’ or ‘inability,’ lack of desire, to act against IS (the Islamic State), to act against Assad, and there are lots of people who will say, ‘Is America becoming a declinist power? Is America becoming isolationist?’

I think one of the other policy conclusions that comes out of this report is very much that there is huge uncertainty outside of the United States about where America is going, what kind of policy America is
going to pursue. Is it interventionist? Is it isolationist? You listen to Rand Paul and you get one point of view; you listen to McCain, you get another point of view.

That's very dangerous, because the result of it is great uncertainty. I would argue that the events of the last couple of months, in some respects, have raised that uncertainty, maybe diminished it a little bit over the last couple of weeks, with the American willingness to actually act and lead vis-à-vis IS in Iraq and, to some degree, Syria. But because it's not being explained, you're left with the sense of uncertainty: ‘They weren’t and now they are. Can we rely on them?’

So I think the events of today, if you will, are kind of reinforcing some of the things that we heard here, in a way that is not really necessary perhaps.

David Speedie

I would like to bring the audience in now. But I'll just close with the thought that on that last point. The point has been made that Obama is basically doing exactly what he was elected to do, which is no more gratuitous US engagement, and the public don't like him for it. In other words, we're not getting involved. That's what he said and that's what he was elected on. But we don't like it. There's some sort of intuitive sense perhaps of lack of forceful engagement.

Susan Gitelson

As I've been listening to you, I've been concerned about over-generalizing what is Europe, what is Asia, and what is America. For example, at the end you said people are confused because there are different opinions in America. Well, of course. This is what our values are—democracy, that people are supposed to express different views.

Now look at Europe. It's very hard to believe that all Europeans agree with each other and within each country, that they agree with each other. For example, one would expect some Conservatives in the UK to say, ‘We have so much experience from our empire and we know and we can help the Americans deal with the world,’ whereas at the moment, France is being ruled by Socialists. And there are many internal debates, but Socialists certainly don't look at the world the same way, except they say ‘the grandeur of France.’

Each country has a different view of itself and then of Europe and then of the United States.

When it comes to Asia, again there is always this tension between the great histories that India and China and other countries have had and the changes going on now. Prime Minister Modi came here and reasserted India's glories and so on. But India is a democracy; China is not.

How do you deal with this when you have these huge generalizations?

Xenia Wickett

It's a great question. Perhaps the place I should have started is, this is not a robust study. I was a scientist way back when. I can't defend this in terms of statistics. On your initial question, we received, I think, 50-some responses. At best, that's five or so responses from each country. So this is not robust.

What makes me somewhat confident with the results is that there were a multitude of differences that aren't in the report, that aren't in what I spoke about between individuals, but there were some common
themes. When I start hearing the same common themes—and, in fact, 'shining city on a hill' came out again and again and again, the same words, the same language, the Marshall Plan again and again and again—you start actually bringing some conclusions.

Now, absolutely they are generalizations. There is no one—perhaps the reason America can't tell you what it’s going to do is because it doesn't know. None of these are for sure. But I do think that when you have multiple people from different walks of life coming with the same language, with the same sentiment, you can make some kind of conclusions.

I would say that the conclusions for Europe are more robust than the conclusions for Asia, partly because we had fewer results from Asia than we did from Europe, partly because there is some commonality, in some respects, between France, Germany, the UK; perhaps less so, Poland, Greece, Turkey, and than Burma, China, India, Pakistan, Indonesia. There are huge differences.

So, yes, you’re absolutely right to say, ‘How sure are you of this?’ The answer is, ‘I’m not.’ But I heard enough common themes within Europe, within the countries within Europe—what to me was a most interesting thing is the very, very few differences between sectors. One of the reasons we did the different sectors—we thought, ‘Maybe the businessmen will look at the private sector and say the American private sector and American technology is great, but the public sector won’t.’ No. Everybody looks at American technology and American innovation and says it’s fantastic.

Again, you can make some generalizations. Are they robust? I certainly would be happy to make policy based on some of the results.

Robert Shaw

In addition to innovation and business, I would have thought that a very common theme among elites would be, either from their personal or a family member’s experience, a high regard for American education and that many of them would have come and studied here or have family members who studied here. Did you find that that experience was generally very positive and caused a favorable opinion of the United States?

Xenia Wickett

Sure. Is American education important? Yes. Interestingly, in Europe it is less important, in most people’s views, than it was a decade ago. Again, I would ask the question, has that to do with visa regulations? I don’t know. It was less potent than was technology, absolutely.

One of the interesting things that—yes, American culture was mentioned, American education was mentioned—American literature was mentioned. Of all the things I thought, I didn't anticipate seeing literature. Don't get me wrong. I think American literature is fantastic. There’s wonderful American literature. But I’m surprised that in this day and age that was something that was mentioned.

American media—very, very mixed views about American media.

But if you start looking at some of the numbers—and this isn’t in the report—if you start looking at the numbers specifically on American education, if you look at the number of international students coming to the United States post-9/11, it dipped significantly, in part because of the tightening visa regime. It's
back up again. But you're also seeing a lot more international students go to Europe today from Asia than you did historically. Whether that's something that will last or not I don't know.

But in the top 20 universities, all but, I think, two of them are American. So that tells you something.

This is now dating back to my South Asia days. One of the most powerful programmes that we do with the Pakistanis, along with many other countries, is visits to the United States. What a lot of Pakistanis will tell you is, 'We hate America, but we still want our children to be educated there.'

Yes, American education is still very, very powerful.

**David Speedie**

The old joke: Yankee, go home, but take me with you.

**Krishen Mehta**

Many of us in America are watching the Roosevelt series, which reflects a historical time in this country when there was supposedly some moral leadership under Franklin Roosevelt and Teddy Roosevelt and so forth. If you were to project the current hotspots around the world and think of a moral leader, like an FDR, being at the helm of American government or leadership—when you say moral leadership is desperately sought from the European perspective—how would the crisis in the Middle East be looked upon from a moral leadership perspective if America acted in the best way possible? How would the anticipated withdrawal from Afghanistan, which is another crisis that is brewing—what will happen after America leaves? How would America act in that instance that would generate world respect?

We see crisis brewing in the South China Sea between China and Japan and the countries there. What would be a reflection of American moral leadership in those scenarios?

If you look at these three hotspots and tell us from your analysis what would be moral leadership under those circumstances, if the right leader was here that met their high respect, what would you say it would be?

**Xenia Wickett**

Let me give you two answers. The easy answer is, we are never going to meet the expectations of the world. We just can't. They cannot be met. The second answer is a follow-on from that.

This is a personal view. The challenges we face today are different from the ones we faced 50 years ago. There has been a trend—this is not a sudden change—but along with globalization has come interdependence. If we ever could, we cannot deal with today's challenges unilaterally or bilaterally. You look at the big issues, whether it's Ebola, pandemics, or counterterrorism. These are not things where one state can say, 'I'm going to deal with it. I'm going to do the XYZ. I'm going to solve the problem.'

The world is changing. The context in which America acts is changing. America is a necessary, but no longer sufficient actor to deal with many of these challenges.
You can’t have an America today that has the ability to stand up alone, if it ever did—and I don’t think it did, but I’m exaggerating to make the point—to stand up alone and be a leader in the way that maybe America once was.

So the challenge is becoming more interdependent, more complex—necessary but no longer sufficient.

Then you do also have this internal challenge, which is that the social contract under which we have existed for the last 60-odd years no longer adds up. So there are some changes taking place within the United States, saying, actually, that we have to make different choices. We do have to make choices that maybe we didn’t need to make 60 years ago or 30 years ago.

The kind of leadership that the world is looking for—this idea of the global policeman that many people say they hate but yet they want—that’s just not viable in today’s world. The expression I use is—that awful expression ‘leading from behind’ that was in *The New Yorker* a year or two years ago—leading from within is what we need to be doing now.

I would argue, to some extent, that President Obama is trying to do that. But there is so much uncertainty, there is so much confusion about what America is doing that that leading from within, if that is what’s going on, which I argue it is, isn’t clear. There isn’t a clear direction. And that’s a real problem, because you’re then getting these senses of unreliability.

The answer to your question is, there isn’t an American solution to Afghanistan, there isn’t an American solution to the Middle East, and there isn’t an American solution to Asia. There is a communal solution to all of these problems, with various different actors, and that is the only solution to any of these problems. That’s far more complex. That’s what you are seeing President Obama try to implement in the Middle East today. That’s what you are seeing President Obama and others try to implement in Afghanistan today. But, as he said, if you don’t have locals on the ground, that’s going to be awfully difficult.

**Anthony Faillace**

You alluded to some of them, but I would be curious: If you were briefing your formal colleagues at the State Department or someone in the White House, what are the key takeaways from a policy perspective? Obviously, the last answer is more of a broad answer, but I’m interested specifically in the research. If you said to them, ‘Hey, this is really interesting,’ what are the two or three things that you would like to communicate?

**Xenia Wickett**

If you look at the report, the report actually has, I think, eight or nine specific policy recommendations.

Emphasize the corporate sector. Do everything in your power to facilitate their working overseas, gain entry into other countries. That means what is going on today. That means TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership) and TPP, two big trade agreements. Everything should be behind those. If I were to argue what is going to be President Obama’s focus for the next two years, it’s going to be TPP and TTIP, for all sorts of reasons.

Visa regime—we have to rethink our visa regime. We all know this. It’s hugely politically controversial, but it has to be done.
Understand that domestic policy is foreign policy as far as the Europeans are concerned. That means you actually have to have the secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services or Department of Justice talking to State Department and others. You have to recognize that at the moment there is this understanding of hypocrisy, because people are watching. You can’t anymore think of it entirely domestically.

Follow through with one of the things that is already happening, which is, focus hard power in Asia, soft power in Europe. Again, recognize that difference.

So there are some real policy changes, some of which are just concrete—we need to rethink our visa regime—some of which are more nuanced.

How do you express yourself? How do you define policies? One of the things that I always say from when I was in the NSC—I spent a vast amount of my time changing language. As somebody who is half-American, half-British, Americans will say ‘we are going to’; Brits will say ‘we will try to.’ Actually, the Americans and the Brits mean exactly the same thing: ‘We’re going to put all of our efforts into doing X.’ The reality is, they come across very, very differently.

And I’m not talking about rhetoric. We need to follow rhetoric with action. There’s a lot of critique in the Middle East. President Obama did an absolutely fantastic speech in 2009 in Egypt. In our results we heard, and the polls suggested as well, great speech; where’s the action?

So there are a number of changes, concrete changes, that we can make, some of which are nuanced, some of which are more black and white.

Anonymous

Just to follow up on what you just said, I was in Cairo in 2010 and I passed Cairo University. I was with someone. I said, ‘Our president gave a speech there,’ and the fellow I was with said, ‘Yes, and nothing happened.’ I don’t know why something is supposed to happen every time a president gives a speech, especially in a foreign country. But anyway.

There has been a lot of conversation about competing models. Of course, people talk about the United States versus the European Community. The United States at least has centralized politics, along with centralized economics, so that New York will come to the aid of Mississippi more easily than Germany will come to the aid of Portugal and so on.

Then come the authoritarian models: the Putin model, where we have discipline, we don’t have gridlock, we don’t have social unrest—or so he would like to have people think—and the China model, where we have term limits at the top, we change our government every now and then, we get fresh blood in, and we make changes, but we do so when we’re good and ready.

These models are competing, one gets the sense, for the rest of the world, which is in the process of development. How do these elites perceive the performance of the US model vis-à-vis those other three?

Xenia Wickett

If you had asked people two or three years ago, the common view was that the Washington Consensus was dead. If you ask people today, that is certainly not the case.
There are two different things. There's the normal foreign policy oscillation that takes place, which is this isolationist versus interventionist, up/down, decline/rise. Then there's the trend that's taking place underneath. I think it's more sensible to watch the trend, what's happening underneath, and let's not get distracted by this white noise. The white noise is ‘Washington Consensus dead/Washington Consensus alive.’

The bottom line is, the Washington Consensus isn’t dead. Churchill had beautiful quotes, and I need to actually sit down and learn them. His quote that democracy is a bad system, but all the rest are worse—

**David Speedie**

Better than all the alternatives.

**Xenia Wickett**

Better than all the alternatives.

‘America will do the right thing, but only after it has done all the wrong things first.’

Back in 2010, if you looked in Asia, a lot of State Department officials would tell you that the best diplomats for the United States in Asia were the Chinese, because the Chinese were flexing their muscles, and that was making everybody else run desperately, helter-skelter, towards the United States.

I would say the same thing about Russia. Look at what many of the Central Asian countries have been doing over the last nine months, ten months. Russia flexes its muscles, and suddenly everybody else wants a little bit of the West.

Again, we can get fixated on this. To me, that's the oscillation. Underneath that is a system that has thus far been proven to be the best of a bad lot. We don’t like it. We have dysfunctional politics. That’s another thing that came out of this study. Europeans think that the American system is not dysfunctional, but broken. I defy anybody to say that the US system today isn’t a little bit dysfunctional, that Washington isn’t a little bit dysfunctional, if not a lot dysfunctional. Yet it’s the best that we have. I think that’s the underlying beneath all of this noise.

**Bob Perlman.**

Just a quick question, building on that. Do you have a trend line for this study that goes back to, let’s say, 2008? The reason I say that is, with some degree of cynicism, perhaps the same folks that were talking about unilateralism and overly aggressive US leadership in the world are now saying perhaps there’s a need for greater US leadership in the world. I understand the differential between Asia and Europe.

I guess my point is, cynically speaking, that countries act in their own self-interest. Then, when you have these tensions, they tend to reinforce the leadership model, and when they don’t, they don’t. I would be curious to hear your views on that.

**Xenia Wickett**

Again it's this distinction between the trend line versus the oscillation. There’s absolutely no question that—I sit in London these days, and when I wander around Europe or I wander around Asia, there’s a lot
of ‘we want American leadership.’ Actually, what they are not saying is, ‘We want American leadership our way. We want American leadership as long as America does what it is that we want it to do, and the minute it does stuff that we don’t it to do, we don’t actually anymore want American leadership.’

The biggest frustration I had as a US diplomat was, I would spend time in India and Pakistan, and I can tell you, I would hear the same thing from both sides, which is, ‘Why on earth is America involved? We don’t need you. Get out of our space. But why aren’t you getting the Indians to do X?’ or ‘Why aren’t you getting the Pakistanis to do Y?’

Let’s be realistic about this. One has to take some of this with a certain amount of skepticism, healthy skepticism.

What we have also seen—to David’s question, what has changed or what is reinforced?—we have also seen over the last few months the real belief—and you saw this in the study—that without American leadership, things don’t happen. The sentiment in Europe for American moral leadership was a real belief that underneath this oscillation was ‘I miss you out in front.’ Because of all of the tensions between us and—Germany doesn’t want to lead. It’s terrified of leading. So it can’t lead. France, dare I say it—apologies to anybody here who is French—can’t lead at the moment. Britain has an election in the next eight months. It’s not going to be leading. So there is this desire for America to lead, albeit with the recognition that as long as they’re leading in the direction they want.

Are we going to answer everybody’s pleas? No, we’re not. That’s where I come back to this idea of leading from within as the only way forward. Unless you have people on the ground, unless you are doing it in coalition—the challenges that we face can only be done in coalition.

**Michael Schmerin**

Have you thought of doing a study of elite perceptions in the United States of Europe and Asia or elite perceptions of the United States in the United States, to further your opinions?

And what role do you think social media and instant access to the news and what’s happening in the world live plays in the perceptions of even elite thought leaders in foreign countries?

**David Speedie**

That’s what we do here, Michael, elite perceptions of the United States.

**Xenia Wickett**

Let me answer the first question and then actually pick up one of your questions.

No. I would argue that a British think tank trying to do elite perceptions of Americans in America or of Americans elsewhere is probably not our job. I spend a fair amount of time trying to differentiate myself from think tanks in this country who focus on changing American policy. I don’t think that’s the job of a British think tank to do. So I will leave that to others.

I’ll tell you what we really want to do. There are two things we really want to do. One—and we do actually have a grant proposal in to do a similar study—I want to look at the Middle East and Central Asia, two very dynamic areas. So I would be interested in that. And I would love to be doing the study every three to
five years. Let’s see how things change, to your point. What was it in 2008? I really want to see what happens in 2017 or 2020. I think there is something that we could learn from longevity. There are some other regions. It would be fun to do Latin America and Africa, but I really want to do the Middle East and Central Asia. There is some other work to be done on that.

To your question on the media and social media, I don’t know whether you saw back in 2012, 2013, the National Intelligence Council, the NIC, produced a report called Global Trends 2030. One of the conclusions that it reached—and it was mirrored by a conclusion that the EUISS (European Union Institute for Security Studies), the European kind of equivalent reached—was about individual empowerment, this idea that the individual was becoming more and more relevant in a way that it hadn’t historically been.

I thoroughly endorse that. I think that, particularly as think tanks, we spend our time focusing on what the government is doing. And we shouldn’t be. One of the things we try to do at Chatham House in the US programme is focus on: What is the private sector doing? What are the questions they are asking? How are they engaging with the world? What are NGOs doing? What is civil society doing?

Your question about education is so important. In today’s world, the state is hugely important. But I would argue, more and more, it’s the non-state actor who is effecting change. The Gates Foundation is far more influential on education and health care in parts of Africa than is not just the US government, but other governments, African governments.

What are we worried about today? We’re worried about IS. IS is not a state. Part of the reason that it’s so terrifying is that it isn’t a state. We don’t know who to attack. We don’t know who is part of IS.

So this idea of non-states—and the media is playing into that. No longer do you have this idea that non-state actors, be they NGOs, individuals, institutions, the corporate sector—they have incredible power. Twitter has incredible power. Just date back to three or four years ago, 2011 or 2012, when the State Department asked Twitter not to shut down for a week or two when they were trying to reboot themselves—I’m sure that’s the wrong expression; apologies—because they were so powerful and such an important player as to what was going on in Tunisia and the Middle East.

So I think your question is an astute one. It’s a smart one. We need to figure out how media is changing the way we react. We need to start paying attention to all sorts of actors that are not part of our normal way of thinking.

**David Speedie**

I think with that, we will wind up. I just have three quick thoughts from this incredibly rich discussion. You have given us so much to think about, Xenia.

On the last point of looking beyond governments—and, of course, we do the same thing; we tend to look at policy, which means governments—just one thing that came out of the report. You quoted that EU countries hold more than 60 percent of the foreign direct investment stock in the United States. So even at a time when Europe may feel that the pivot is away, as it were, there’s still this incredibly high level of investment in the United States on the business level.

The second thing, your point about the quote in Egypt: the president came and nothing happened. Why? Because of expectations that something will happen.
Back to your point, Xenia, that we’re not the indispensable nation anymore, but we’re still the necessary nation, in conjunction with that, the thought of the diversity of the challenges. I remember when I worked at a foundation, we tried, and quickly gave up trying, to embrace the whole thought of new dimensions of security. Right now, look at what we are taking on. We’re taking on everything from ISIS to Ebola. US leadership is necessary, leadership from within, as you say, but we need what I called in an essay I wrote ‘a coalition of the concerned’ to take on these issues.

So these and many others are things that you have covered here. I want to thank Xenia particularly because she stopped off in New York solely for this interview. She’s winging her way between Washington and Ottawa. So it’s with a redoubled sense of obligation and thanks that I ask you to join me in thanking her for stopping in New York.

Xenia Wickett

Thank you all very much.