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Top Five Lessons from the Fight for Freedom in Egypt

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As millions march in the streets of Cairo, it is far too soon to tell whether the upheaval will deliver the economic and political freedoms that the people demand. History is littered with radical transformations that have taken societies in radically different directions.

The French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and the Iranian Revolution left their people with regimes as bad as or worse than the ones they overthrew. On the other hand, the fall of the Berlin Wall brought freedom to Eastern Europe, the Kwangju uprising in South Korea started that country on a path to liberal reform, and apartheid was abolished in South Africa.

Yet even the early stages of the struggles in Egypt highlight foreign policy truisms that Congress and the Administration would do well to remember.

1. Economic Freedom Matters. A stagnant domestic economy has long kept many of Egypt's 80 million citizens deprived of economic opportunity. Egypt has floundered in the status of “mostly unfree” in *The Wall Street Journal* and Heritage Foundation's *Index of Economic Freedom* for over a decade. Egypt has implemented a series of reforms of business regulations that were only cosmetic. On the two indicators that are the most powerful predictors of success for developing economies—property rights and corruption—Egypt scores far below world averages. Worse, the country has shown sharp declines on both indicators in recent years.

2. The U.N. Human Rights Council Has Been Ineffective. Many United Nations programs are ineffectual in promoting economic and political freedoms in nations like Egypt. The Human Rights Council (HRC) is a case in point. The HRC was created in 2006 to replace the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, a body that had failed to hold governments accountable for violating basic human rights and fundamental freedoms. The HRC has proven to be no better—and in some ways, worse—than the commission it replaced.

The HRC conducted a periodic review of Egypt's human rights record in 2010, but it has failed to adopt any resolution on the human rights situation in Egypt.

The U.S. should care about the effectiveness of the U.N. The U.S. has been the largest financial supporter of the U.N. since the organization's founding in 1945. Americans should ask: If the HRC will not confront nations such as Egypt regarding their human rights abuses, what is it good for?

3. The Obama Doctrine Has Failed in the Middle East. President Barack Obama has emphasized “soft power” and has focused U.S. diplomatic efforts

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in the Middle East primarily on trying to diplomatically engage Iran and jump-start the stalled Israeli–Palestinian peace talks. Neither effort has yielded any practical results.

Instead, the appearance of American weakness in (and withdrawal from) the Middle East, combined with Obama’s coddling of Iran and others, gave Obama and the U.S. less influence and fewer options in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East—a perfect example of the wrong kind of American leadership leading to unstable situations that the U.S. has difficulty in leading and shaping. The intent of the Obama Doctrine may be well-intentioned—ostensibly to improve America’s standing in the world—but it has made America and the world far less secure because it has not applied practical and credible solutions to serious problems.

4. The Administration Has Made Missteps in Public Diplomacy. As during the Iranian election protests in 2009, social networking tools have proven to be significant both inside Egypt and in how the rest of the world has interpreted and engaged on the issue. Washington, however, is still far from an effective participant in the global online conversation. In 2010, the U.S. State Department launched a program to promote “Internet freedom.” But as with many of Washington’s online initiatives, the first thing the project seems to have accomplished is generating a good deal of controversy.

In January 2011, *Foreign Policy* contributing editor Evgeny Morozov concluded not only that the effort had accomplished little but also that “by aligning themselves with Internet companies and organizations, [Secretary of State Hillary] Clinton’s digital diplomats have convinced their enemies abroad that Internet freedom is another Trojan horse for American imperialism.” American efforts in online public diplomacy are not on par with what should be expected from the world’s lone superpower.

5. Peace Through Strength Is More Than a Bumper Sticker. Since taking office, the Obama Administration has been shaving off capabilities and resources for the U.S. military, arguing that it is providing just enough to keep America safe and secure. As a result, today the U.S. is straining to meet its military commitments.

Obama’s military policies have also left us ill-prepared for the future. As the events in Egypt have demonstrated, conditions in the world can change in a heartbeat. When that happens, the U.S. will have to confront the world with the military it has on hand. With the current turmoil and uncertainty in the Middle East—an area of vital U.S. interest—now is hardly the time to talk about cutting defense. It makes no sense to try to save money by making America unsafe.

Change of Course. The White House and Congress can show that they have learned the lessons of the challenges we face today by:

- **Adopting a serious economic freedom agenda.** The U.S. should stress effective aid programs like the Millennium Challenge Account and aggressively pursue free trade agreements and talks.
- **Holding the U.N. accountable.** The U.S. should demand reforms to improve effectiveness and accountability in the HRC and other U.N. organizations. The most effective way to press for reforms is to link specific demands with financial withholding legislated by Congress.
- **Abandoning the Obama Doctrine.** The alternative is to reassert American leadership in defense of liberty around the world.
- **Getting serious about U.S. public diplomacy reforms.** Government’s engagement online and its other public diplomacy activities demand attention.
- **Providing for the common defense.** Congress can demonstrate its resolve to maintain adequate defense now. Matching the President’s budget request for defense in FY 2011 provides the minimum basis required to provide adequate defense budgets in the future.

A Position of Strength. In dealing with the aftermath of whatever the outcome is in Egypt, the U.S. should lead from a position of strength. These initiatives are a good start.

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