The CATO Institute

Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America
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The CATO Institute held a book forum with Ted Galen Carpenter of the CATO Institute and author of Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America. Comments were provided by Steven Clemons of the New America Foundation and Doug Bandow of the American Conservative Defense Alliance.

Carpenter stated that over the past several decades American foreign policy has lost any sense of coherence and restraint. Since the end of the Cold War, policymakers have had misplaced priorities about vital American interests in the world. Carpenter criticized the false dichotomy that states American foreign policy must necessarily lean towards intervention or isolationism, and suggested a middle ground. “Smart Power” as defined by Carpenter is a less risky and cost effective approach to foreign policy. Its essence lies in the idea of strategic independence, which advocates military force in the defense of vital security interests and promotes cultural, economic, and political openness. This new policy would reduce the world’s complacency on U.S. might to solve global problems and would limit security commitments so not to lead to unnecessary and unrewarding interventions.

Clemons discussed some of the themes in Carpenter’s book and stated that one of the flaws of U.S. foreign policy is that America has pursued misguided objectives that they are unable to fulfill causing the global community to see the U.S. as all rhetoric and bluster. He stated that while America’s pervasive presence overseas is effective in projecting power it also causes great resentment and in some cases destabilizes the situation. He concluded with one general criticism of Carpenter’s book, that the U.S. should empower groups, such as NGOs to promote democracy, political reform, and building civil society in order to promote organic democracy building.

Bandow generally agreed with Carpenter’s ideas on the use of American power and his desire for a new orientation for U.S. foreign policy. According to Bandow, there is bipartisan consensus in Washington that is pro-intervention, believes the U.S. should be a global leader, and supports continuing high levels of military spending. Bandow concluded with three main criticisms of American foreign policy. First, the U.S. has preserved too many outmoded alliances that are irrelevant to the current geopolitical order. Second, the U.S. is extending security commitments to too many new states. Lastly, the U.S. intervenes in too many frivolous conflicts and attempts to impose a political order on countries when there is no tradition and their society cannot support it.