

And if Ukraine had a bomb?  
*A conversation with Stephen Walt*

By Xiangyu Ma

Interview conducted by Alyssa Minamide.

Stephen Walt may be an IR theorist of considerable repute but when you're sitting across him in a room it is his gregariousness that is most striking. He has a very personable verve about him; he sits you at ease. His levity is contagious. All of the intellect and perspicacity you hear and expect follow quite naturally. With Walt you never get short-changed: you get both style and substance aplenty.

Students of international relations will be very familiar with Walt. An IR professor at the Kennedy School in Harvard University, Stephen Walt is feted for many things, among which is his work on "Balance of Threat" in *Origin of Alliances* that built upon antecedent balance-of-power theories. Walt visited the Claremont McKenna College Atheneum on November 6th, 2014. Just before he spoke, the Keck Center had the opportunity to sit down with Walt for just over half an hour and got his take on some interesting current affairs questions of the day.

Would the Ukraine-Russia crisis have turned out better for Ukraine if it hadn't given up its nuclear arsenal in 1994? What should the U.S. do with respect to ISIL? And how will a Republican Congress affect Obama's foreign policy? Stephen Walt's extemporaneous musings on these subjects will charm you even as they edify.

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> *We've read a lot from you over the past few years. What are you currently focusing on in your research?*

I'm working on a book that I'll be speaking about later today on why American foreign policy does not seem to be as effective as we'd like it to be. Particularly in the period since the

end of the Cold War. It's an attempt to understand why we seem to be making the same mistakes over and over again.

*> Speaking of current affairs, in the aftermath of this week's midterm elections, we've got a Republican majority in both the House and the Senate. It seems like Obama's domestic policy is pretty much gridlocked, and his strongest point, some people say, is going to be his foreign policy. Do you agree with this? How do you think the Republican majority is going to affect our foreign policy?*

It won't have an enormous proactive effect because Congress doesn't have the capacity to have its own foreign policy agenda in a positive sense. It can't order the US Navy to steam some place. So Congress can complicate Obama's efforts to negotiate a nuclear deal with Iran by refusing to lift sanctions, if it wanted to voting additional sanctions which he could veto, but there are real limits in an active sense. As a result, the conventional wisdom is that a President in Obama's position would want to emphasize foreign affairs because that's the area where he has the greatest latitude.

The difficulty he will face, I think, is that there are not a lot of issues where it's easy to imagine a big win in foreign policy being pulled off anytime soon. You wouldn't bet that he would have suddenly a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians in the next two years. He might get a deal with Iran, but that's going to be tricky for reasons I've already mentioned. It's hard to imagine the situation with Russia improving dramatically. Either because Putin folds his cards, or the United States somehow comes up with some magic jujitsu for dealing with that. So I think you might see more activity on the foreign policy front, but it's hard to say where a big win is going to come from.

*> Speaking of Iran, you mentioned in one of your articles that US and some of the other big powers, when they're having these nuclear negotiations with Iran, kind of have this obsession with breakout capacity. On that note, do you feel nuclear powers should just stay back and let Iran develop their nuclear capacities, or should they continue to make that active effort to provide positive incentives for Iran to not proliferate, not have nuclear weapons.*

The long term objective has to be to structure our relationship with Iran, and conceivably with other potential nuclear powers such that they decide it's not in their interest to pursue the capability. The technical capacity is not that difficult any longer. The knowledge is available. It takes a while, but almost any reasonably sophisticated country that really wanted to acquire this knowledge can do so. And that means at some fundamental level, you either have to continue to take physical action to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon if it chose to, or you have to persuade them that going down that road is not in their interest. It's just worth noting that the number of countries that are technologically capable of building nuclear weapons probably exceeds fifty. Maybe more. And of that fifty, relatively few have decided that that's something they want to do. So it's not impossible to persuade countries that this is not a smart move.

*> Do you think that's a result of the non-proliferative regime that's been built up with the institutions, or is it more just countries being realist in their tendencies?*

I think it's a combination of several things. The non-proliferation regime has certainly been a factor by making it more difficult, by ensuring or making it likely that attempts to acquire nuclear weapons will be detected, and therefore can be sanctioned, by providing nuclear technology to countries that wanted them, and not requiring them to necessarily develop a full indigenous capacity. The non-proliferation treaty over the 50 year period has been a success story. Not a perfect success story, but a success story.

Second, the United States provided security guarantees to a number of potential nuclear powers as well. South Korea being a good example. We did two things simultaneously. We said we'd be very unhappy if you get nuclear weapons, and we'll find ways to punish you economically. And that's something South Korea took seriously. And at the same time, we're prepared to remain committed to your defense. And that means you're under the American nuclear umbrella to some degree, and therefore you don't really need them. And South Koreans were ultimately persuaded that the combination of American help and hint of significant American unhappiness was enough to convince them that they didn't need to go nuclear.

*> There's been a recent campaign by quite a few of the non-nuclear weapon states to have this humanitarian campaign which has kind of turned into a campaign for zero nuclear weapons. How do you see this evolving over the next decade? Do you see this evolving into something that could produce policy, or is this just another wave of countries saying we need to stop this because of people.*

I think you're not going to see a significant effort at nuclear abolition that really changes things in my lifetime. And I'm in good health and expect to live a long time. It doesn't mean not ever, but for some fairly obvious reasons the main nuclear weapon states do regard them as a very valuable final guarantee of their own sovereignty and security. At the same time, I do think there's a growing awareness that we have far more of them on the planet than anyone really needs. And that the more nuclear weapons that exist, the more countries that have them, the greater the possibility that non-state actors might get a hold of them. Most people are not particularly worried about nuclear weapons being held by governments because governments have a return address. And so they can't use them without being retaliated against, or being worried about being retaliated against. And everybody knows that would ruin your whole day. Everybody really does know that. You don't have to be real smart to figure that out.

But nuclear weapons in the hands of a non-state actor that is either willing to martyr itself, or some member, or may think it can use one of these things and not be detected, or have it blamed on someone else, is more worrisome. Even if it's not quite the same as thousands of nuclear weapons go off. All of that, I think, has led more people to think efforts to reduce nuclear arsenal stockpiles, and bring them under reliable control, would be in everybody's interest. Even if going to zero is beyond what anybody's willing to do. I don't see the United States doing it, I don't see Russia doing it. I don't see China doing it, etc. It's conceivable, I suppose, that Britain and France might eventually decide that it's too expensive to maintain their own independent nuclear arsenal, so they might eventually decide, but I think nuclear weapons will still be around and remain in the main great powers' arsenal for quite some time.

*> Do you think Ukraine's decision to give up its nuclear weapons, has that affected the calculations of other countries? After seeing what Russia has done. Let's say if Ukraine hadn't made that decision: would it have changed what's happening today?*

Great question. It also shows you how hard it is to do serious counterfactual analysis. Because Ukraine's history from '94 to today would have been very different if it had retained its nuclear arsenal. So we wouldn't be talking about the same situation that eventually emerged last year and this year. I don't know how exactly Ukraine's history would have been different, but its relationship with Russia would have been different from '94 to today, its relationship with us would have been different.

You know, who knows whether it would have been better or worse, but the point is it's sort of hard to say, well, let's magically give Ukraine back its nuclear weapons in 2012, and then see what happens, that's hard to do. It shows you that counterfactuals are hard to do in a convincing way. Having said all that, I think if Ukraine still had its own nuclear arsenal, and had some plausible means of delivering them, then I think you would not have seen Russia take the actions that it did earlier this year to retake Crimea and certainly to back the rebel forces in the eastern parts of Ukraine. I can tell a story for where they still might have, but I think they would have been very leery of doing that, because taking territory away from a nuclear armed power is really quite risky.

It raises then the other interesting question: if Ukraine had kept those nuclear weapons, would the EU have courted Ukraine in quite the way it did, would people have been proposing Ukraine for NATO membership all along? Remember, Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons in part because the United States put enormous pressure on them to do so, and said basically, if you do this lots of good things will happen to you, we'll give you lots of money, lots of aid, lots of other stuff, and if you don't, don't come talking to us, you're not our friends anymore. And so, you could argue that if Ukraine had kept its own nuclear weapons, it would not have been seen as a potential member of NATO ever, and it would have been on its own, and it would have had to work out a relationship with Russia. The Russians would have had a lot of influence there, but

they wouldn't probably wouldn't have felt the need to use military force or the ability to use military force at relatively low risk.

That's a great question. Somebody should put it on a final exam.

*> In a 2012 interview that you did with the Brown Journal of World Affairs, you said that "the U.S. should be prepared to intervene in the Middle East if the balance of power looks like it's going to shift against us in a fundamental way." Given that train of thought, do you feel that the Iraq and Syria interventions are warranted? Given this sort of balance of power theory...*

No, for two reasons. One, the primary American strategic interest in the Middle East is that it not be dominated by a single hostile power, and that's been true for fifty or sixty years and it's largely connected to wanting to maintain access to energy, not for the United States itself but just so that oil and gas continues to flow out to world markets. One could argue that that interest is slowly declining for a variety of reasons but that's a separate question. The Middle East is further away from being dominated by any single actor now than it has been in my lifetime. It's more divided, and along more dimensions, than it has been in decades, whether it's Sunni versus Shia, Arab versus Persian, secular versus sacred, the various different jihadi groups, some of whom help each other and some of whom don't, et cetera, so, the idea that any single country or actor is going to dominate the region... or outside power, if WE can't come in and control the region, and we clearly can't, having tried, then nobody else is going to be able to. So there isn't a strategic interest.

The second reason why it's a bad idea is we haven't figured out a way to do it. We have no strategy for coming in and solving this problem, because ultimately it's a problem of local governance that involves the creation of a set of legitimate political institutions in these various places, and that's not something you can do from Washington D.C., that's not something that we can inject into these countries. In fact when we try, we generate a very powerful allergic reaction, and we tend to foster the emergence of these extremist movements rather than deal with them. So, I will stick with my earlier view, the emergence of these organizations like ISIL and others does not change my view of this issue, it's not a place we should be trying to do social engineering.

> *And you wrote about this, how there's always going to be backlash from these attempts, from one of your recent Foreign Policy piece, so should the U.S. be more aware of this and just change the policy?*

We ought to be much more realistic about what our particular capabilities and knowledge base allow us to do. We're very good at overthrowing other governments in many parts of the world, not in every part but in many parts, we've done it in a number of different places. We're pretty good at deterring large-scale aggression, so countries that know that going to war will bring you into a conflict with the United States tend not to do it, because we're very good at certain kinds of warfare and they know that, and we still are. We're even pretty good at reversing aggression, so throwing Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991 was not that hard to do. What we're not good at doing is organizing other societies, and particularly in places that are very different than the United States, where their histories are different, where there are lots of internal divisions that we don't understand.

When we try to do that, we tend to fail, right? So I was in favor of going into Afghanistan in 2002 to oust the Taliban and to try and catch Osama bin Laden, but we should have stopped on those two. Well first of all, we should have focused more on catching bin Laden back then, but then we allowed that mission to move into one of creating a modern Western-style state in Afghanistan, which is something we didn't know how to do, and hasn't worked very well. So it's recognizing there's a role for American power in the world, but also being aware of what we're good at and what we're not good at.

> *So would you say that there's never a right way to "win the hearts and minds?"*

I don't think you want to say never, because there are circumstances when we've done somewhat better, but it usually takes a long time, it helps if our involvement is understood by the people we're intervening on as being legitimate, understandable, justifiable, and it also helps that they actually want us there. So everyone likes to talk about Japan and Germany as the two great examples of occupations that worked and transformed these countries into pro-American

democracies, and there were several features about those cases that were different. First of all they were modern industrial societies, and fairly homogeneous countries as well, so not big ethnic or religious divisions within them. Second, they had started the wars that led to the foreign occupation, and they knew it. Whether their launching the war was justified or not is a separate question, but the point is they understood that they didn't have an occupying army there for no reason whatsoever. Thirdly, the Cold War. So after World War II, when the United States was in West Germany and in Japan. Those were societies that were also deeply worried about the Soviet Union. And if you were a German and you understood what the Nazis had done to Russia, you understood that having some Americans there to keep the Russians from showing up in the rest of Germany and doing to you what had you had done to them was a pretty big incentive to get along with the Americans.

Put all those things together, and it explains why those experiments worked pretty well, and why some of our other efforts in other places have worked pretty poorly.

*> All said and done, what do you think is the best course of action for the U.S. in regard to ISIL? Should we maintain the current course of action or should we actually put troops on the ground?*

No. Well, first of all, we do have troops on the ground. We have a small number of troops there, but there are people doing advising, there are people providing guidance for various kinds for our aircraft and things like that. So it's not like the American presence is zero at this point. But no, we should not put a lot more troops there. This is ultimately a fight for the local powers there, the Kurds and the rest of Iraq, and the Jordanians, and the Turks perhaps, because they are the ones who are most directly affected by this. This isn't affecting your life at all.

Remember, the United States could not dictate or control Iraq's internal politics when we had 150,000 troops there. The idea that we are suddenly going to have some clever way of putting 5000 and 10,000 back in there and resolve this problem is wrong. The more we do and the more everyone else in the region will do, the more we will reinforce the sort of message to groups like ISIL that Americans love to kill Muslims, they want to dominate this whole region, they are constantly finding excuses to drop bombs on us and therefore you should join up on us



and resist this evil aggressor from overseas; and that's not the message we want to be reinforcing. I wish I could. I mean, it's awful what some of these organizations are doing, but if you don't have – doing something just because they are doing bad things is not smart. We can't take action without a strategy that has some prospect of success.

I do find it troubling, although I don't have a good explanation for it, that our enemies seem to be a lot better at fighting than the parties that we keep allying ourselves with. We pour billions into training the Iraq army and it turned out to be useless. We pour billions into the central government in Afghanistan building up the Afghan security forces and they still have enormous problems with the Taliban who aren't getting help from anybody, except a little bit probably from Pakistan. And I am still sort of puzzled why the groups we are fighting seem to be better than the groups we are helping. I am not quite sure what the problem is. I am genuinely puzzled. Because given where we are, you know, fat safe and happy over here in the Western hemisphere, we must at least try to do a better job picking the winning teams over there occasionally. Unless, and this would be the case in some, they are so reprehensible that we just can't.

You know – this is overly cynical – but as a former US diplomat said to me once at a conference: “So let me get this straight, in Syria, Assad, whom we hate, is attacking al-Qaeda, whom we hate, and that's causing problems for Iran, whom we hate. What's not to like about this?” Overly Machiavellian, but there's a lesson in there somewhere.

*> Given all that's happening in the Middle East, is Obama's pivot to East Asia still relevant? Does it make sense in the grand scheme of things? What is your take on that?*

Well, two things. One, it was the right strategic move, if you are thinking long-term, thinking about America's overall interests and priorities. Shifting some of our strategic focus to Asia, I think was for all sorts of obvious reasons having to do with China rising economic importance. It has not been sustained as consistently as would have been ideal, but it's also true that China's rise is sometimes exaggerated. What people are really doing is saying “Look, if this continues for 20 or 30 years, it's going to be very consequential and already has some effects.”

But we're really sort of hedging against something that we think might be true in a decade or two. So that means that we don't have to have a mass shift of resources, suddenly put twice as many military forces and sign up a whole bunch of new allies. A measured response is possible. Nonetheless, I do think it's been a sort of erratic implementation of it and Obama has allowed himself to get blown off course by events a few times. That's thought number one.

Thought number two, is that for the near to medium term, the challenge in Asia will be at least as much diplomatic challenge as military. That if the United States wants to maintain its position in Asia, and in effect prevent China from dominating in Asia the way we dominate the Western hemisphere, that's the goal, we just want to make sure that China will not become a regional hegemon. That's going to require close coordination with a lot of different Asian countries. And managing that coalition, if you want to call it that, is going to be a very tricky diplomatic task. Much harder than, say, managing NATO during the Cold War. Because unlike NATO during the Cold War, most of these countries have very extensive economic ties with China and will continue for the foreseeable future. Which means that they face real tradeoffs between their strategic partnerships and their economic ties. Secondly, some of these countries don't like each other very much. South Korea and Japan, for example. And the distances involved are enormous. So if there is a problem with Taiwan, does Australia really have anything to contribute? Is it really in Australia to jeopardize its economic ties with China to protect Taiwan? And you can multiply by examples like that, because again, it's not like NATO you couldn't threaten France without threatening Denmark and Germany and Belgium and all those other places. So managing that coalition is going to be a huge challenge for us, because we are over here, and that requires a lot of very smart, very well trained, knowledgeable diplomats, as much as it requires having aircraft carriers and submarines and planes and marines and things like that.

*> And is that a course, you think we should still be making nonetheless with all of that?*

Yes, I think at least for the future. I mean, this has been a core principle of American grand strategy for the century. That we want to be the only great power in the Western hemisphere, because that means we don't have to worry about anybody attacking us. And we

don't have to even worry about much what's happening in this part of the world. And that's, by the way, one of the reasons why we can wander all over the world interfering with other places. If you're China, you have to worry a lot about India and Pakistan and Japan, North Korea and South Korea and even a little bit about Russia. You have to focus a lot of attention on your immediate environment. You can't spend a lot of time worrying about the Western hemisphere. But imagine that China dominates Asia, has driven the United States out, has gotten our allies to sort of distance themselves from us. And now doesn't have to worry about protecting its own territory, its own sea lines, communications and things like that. I'm not saying that China would then start wanting to build alliances in the Western hemisphere and partnerships with Europe, but it could at least think about it in ways it cannot now.

From a very long term strategic perspective, having China, having Russia, having even other countries in other places of the world worry mostly about their neighbors and not about us, is good for us. It's the secret to American grand strategy and one that we have by and large forgotten over the last 20 or 30 years when we've run around the world doing everything we possibly can to annoy people.

*> Do you think, does China have an interest, or are they kind of pursuing this position as a regional hegemon in Asia? So far, it does seem as if they're more focused on creating economic ties?*

Remember that, Chinese I think are doing something what the United States was doing in the 19th century when we concentrated primarily on building up our economy and didn't have a big foreign policy, and we had to get through a civil war too. And we expanded across North America and consolidated that. Overtime, we also began to push other countries out of the Western hemisphere and we kind of completed that by the first part of the 20th century. The Chinese have been focused primarily on economic growth which makes perfect sense, not picking fights. They have been more assertive in the last several years, territorial disputes over Senkaku Islands in the Southern China sea and flexing their muscles a bit more. And if you read Chinese writing on this, you know, they'd clearly like to reduce the American security role in Asia. And it's perfectly understandable. You know, what major power would want the world's

most powerful country to have close alliances with several of your neighbors; a hundred thousand troops; powerful warships; submarines, airplanes, deployed near your borders.

Suppose the Soviet Union had Military bases in Mexico and Canada. We would have found that rather uncomfortable. And we went to considerable lengths to prevent things like that from happening over the last sixty years. Why would China be any different? They would like to get us out of Asia, but they don't want to fight World War III to do it.

*> Is there anything in particular regarding foreign policy that you wish the general public pay more attention to, specific issues, general overarching problems?*

The public is still doesn't care much about international affairs. We are still a remarkably insular country. We tend to focus mostly on what's happening inside in the United States. People don't know foreign languages, people don't travel as much, they don't care in certain ways. That allows or encourages political attitudes to be based more on stereotypes and myths than what's really happening. I think that Americans since the second world war have consistently exaggerated the degree to which the outside world is really dangerous. They have greatly overstated popular perception of how dangerous the things were. Today we greatly inflate the dangers terrorism actually poses to Americans. Like the last calculation I read, based on numbers of Americans who died in terrorist incidents from 9/11 and onward — if you put all that in your chance of being killed or injured in terrorist incidents is one in three and a half million. That's not a serious problem. That's a problem: it's not good when it happens but the number of deaths and injuries is really small and yet we are spending hundreds of billions of dollars. And anyway, and that causes us to overreact to bigger problems that get us into situations like Iraq War which was based on an inflated calculation of threats and encourages us to let the NSA collect emails and do various things with it.

It would be good for the public just to keep these dangers in perspective and recognize that there's no hundred percent protection against anything. When something bad happens, it's not always an example of government's failing to do something to protect you. Sometimes bad things just happen and reminding people of that wouldn't be such a bad thing.