On September 29, 2014 at 4:30 PM in Lewis Auditorium, Goldwin Smith Hall, Stephen Van Evera, the Ford International Professor at MIT’s Political Science department, gave a talk entitled “U.S. Grand Strategy and Current Crises: Ukraine, the Middle East, and East Asia.” The talk was part of the Einaudi Center’s ongoing Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series.

After a brief introduction from Einaudi Center Director and Vice Provost for International Affairs Fredrik Logevall, Van Evera framed his discussion by articulating the similarities between the current foreign policy situation in the U.S. and the situation that global powers in 1815 faced.

Similar to 1815, Van Evera argued, the United States faces less threat from other national powers than from non-state actors. The best way to address the threats by non-state actors is with a grand alliance of all powers. Moreover, the nuclear revolution has made wars of conquest among great
powers impossible. Van Evera continued by stating that the perceived security threats by China and Russia are actually false: stifling China’s rising power would be extremely counterproductive and Russia poses a threat because of the weakness of its infrastructure and its economic instability, not its military might.

Aside from addressing the perceived threat from Russia and China, Van Evera highlighted threats that could impact the world: climate change, pandemics, global financial crises, and also the looming growth of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). These threats, he argued, required the collaboration of global powers.

Van Evera then proceeded to articulate the U.S. grand strategy and potential impediments to it. First, he suggested that the U.S. pursue and sustain a peaceful agreement with Russia and China, one that pursued a settlement on Ukraine, Russian noninterference, and also framed the pivot to Asia as a way to secure all East Asia states. In doing so, Van Evera advocated for the establishment of U.S. global legitimacy, or rather, the continued reassurance that the U.S. acts in the interest of everyone including itself.

Finally, Van Evera acknowledged the various challenges to the “global alliance” strategy. Aside from potential special interest groups, he also mentioned U.S. cultural insularity, general ignorance surrounding relevant history, and the prevalence and influence of neoconservative thinking in U.S. foreign policy. He concluded the discussion with a section detailing areas where more research was needed, especially regarding the future of WMDs, the influence of religion and war, and effective ways to protect the commons.