Why Calling Countries “Strategically Important” Is Hurting U.S. Foreign Policy

Lincoln A. Mitchell

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In foreign policy discussions, countries are often described as being “strategically important”.

But what does this actually mean? The term is far less clear than it should be. In part, it’s because there’s no cost to call a country strategically vital, and doing so makes both the speaker and country feel more important. For diplomats, it is de rigueur to describe the countries where they work as strategically important. To go to a country and then tell its leaders that they’re not all that important would be, well, undiplomatic.

There’s also some truth to this. All countries, particularly from America’s point of view, have some strategic value. The problem with this approach is that if all countries have strategic importance, then no country has strategic importance and all countries are of equal import. Strategic value only has meaning if it is a relative term, and referring to a country as strategically important only means something if it is considered more or less strategic than other countries.

There are a few reasons which can explain the import of the most important countries to the U.S. Powerful and wealthy allies such as Canada, Germany, the U.K. or Japan are important because of the political and economic ties between the U.S. and those countries. Other countries are strategically important because of their size and power, though not as friendly to the U.S., like Russia and China. Other countries are vital because they either represent potential threats to national security or because their cooperation on national security interests in important to the U.S. Pakistan, North Korea, and Iraq fall into this category. There is virtual consensus about the importance of these countries, and a handful of others, like Mexico and India, but after that the picture is far less clear.

Evaluating the strategic import of other countries is more difficult and is frequently done through narrative, through storytelling rather than on more rigorous analysis. The chance of political instability and an increase in political stability, rising Islamic fundamentalism and the absence of Islamic fundamentalism, having important resources and proximity to countries with important resources, rising anti-American sentiment and rising pro-American sentiment—all have been used as explanations for why countries whose strategic importance might otherwise be questioned are actually important.

These narratives are of limited value, because they make it difficult to determine which countries are more important than the others. To sort out the relative importance of these
countries of second-tier relevance, the term “strategically important” needs to be defined more clearly.

Does strategic import mean that the country is a close ally, a potential or real threat, a country whose cooperation is needed on an important issue, a country where massive human rights violations are occurring, a politically instable country, or something else? Currently it means all these things and so has become a relatively useless term.

This is unfortunate, because strategic importance should be an idea that more effectively guides decision making. All countries are important, particularly for the people who live there, but setting priorities and making decisions about commitment of resources and the attention of high-level policy makers is an essential part of a rational foreign policy. This relies on an understanding of what is truly important and what is not.