The Response to Dubai Ports World: Ugly Politics Overrunning Fact and Sound Policy

Contributed by George C. Landrith
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The recent controversy over the transfer of the management operations of six domestic ports from a British company to an Arab company is really about only one thing: trust. Right now, we are fighting wars in a part of the world that often does not trust us. In two countries our soldiers are trying to rebuild countries we partially destroyed. They live among the Iraqis and the Afghanis and try, one person at a time, to build trust and ask them to accept us as liberators. In spite of frequent violence from foreign insurgents that jeopardize that relationship, and bad memories of previous power-abusing regimes, everyday people in those countries are trying to trust and live with soldiers from the world’s only remaining superpower. Given their history, it is a remarkable the leap of faith the average Iraqi or Afghani has willingly taken.

The United Arab Emirates is a small, peaceful country that has worked hard to transform itself from an impoverished region just a few decades ago to an advanced nation where its citizens enjoy a high standard of living and remarkable freedom. During that time, the UAE has increasingly worked to build relationships and foster a reputation as a country worth doing business with.

As part of its transformation, it has made a trusting relationship with the United States a priority. Militarily, it has opened its air space, its airfields, and its own ports to us – the UAE’s ports host more US Navy ships than any port outside the United States. They have worked with US authorities in stopping terrorist financing and money laundering in their country by freezing bank accounts and exchanging information on suspicious persons and entities. They have pledged $215 million to help rebuild Iraq. And they have extended their generosity to our citizens at home, donating $100 million to Hurricane Katrina Victims.

They are an exemplary ally in every way. They are exactly the model of what we hope Iraq and Afghanistan might be one day. That is why this deal means so much – the world is watching. And yet, America seems to be saying, we will go out of our way to demonstrate

that we don’t trust you. We are effectively saying, that no matter what you do, it won’t be good enough. That is not smart politics or wise policy.

What’s infuriating about this common response is that this transaction between two foreign companies doesn’t even really require our trust because national security is not involved in any way in this deal. In fact, even the day-to-day operations will remain essentially domestic. Too many Americans are exercising their ignorance or their ugly prejudice on what is basically a question of whose name is on the leasing papers. The ports will not be owned by another country, nor will security operations be run or managed by another country.

At each of these U.S. ports, before or after any transfer of ownership, and after any future transfers of ownership, you would observe the same operation. You would see local people handling cargo; mostly unionized longshoreman. You would see security and inspection of cargo being handled exclusively by the Coast Guard and U.S. Customs. The only difference would be the management and finances of the shipping business associated with the port would be overseen by middle managers and executives who most likely wouldn’t even be physically present at the docks.

This role was previously played by a British company. In other U.S. ports, this role is currently played by management companies from Singapore and China. To blatantly discriminate against a company just because it is from an Arab country – one that is a strong ally – will be viewed around the world for what it is – sheer ignorance or ugly racism. Neither will help us enlarge our circle of friends and allies in the fight against terrorism.

Those criticizing this transaction because of concerns for our safety and security will surely jeopardize both if they defeat this deal. Preventing the fair exchange of business to Arab companies will give our enemies more fuel to feed the fire. More importantly, it will cause our best friends to question why they bother trusting us or befriending us.

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