Research is my passion. Research has the ability to affect change by providing insight where such insight might go unnoticed and, in this sense, it is an end in itself. I was first attracted to the Fellowship program because, while I have immeasurable respect for research irrespective of applicability, I find it most exciting when it leads to action and is applied to problems we face today.

Research changes not only policies, but also perspectives. Realizing this has been largely a process of self-enrichment: while I have participated in my share of debates and discussions, the perspectives that have changed have primarily been my own. As a Junior Fellow, I would go beyond this self-enrichment. It is because of the Endowment’s ability to act as an influential force in both generating insight and the practical application of such insight—its ability to offer both process and product—that I find the Junior Fellowship program so attractive. I see it offering me invaluable experience in research, application, and the execution of policy, three elements that I know will one day be essential to my anticipated career in policy and analysis.

I am especially interested in the opportunity to contribute to the Democracy Building or Non-Proliferation projects. In these issues I see the synthesis between my interest in political theory with respect to identity, governance, and security and my desire to apply these theories to the real world and its most pressing challenges.

I have spent the past few years familiarizing myself with the methods and theories of great thinkers of the past and present, and observing the world around me with an attentive eye. This has prepared me for what is the necessary next step in pursuing a career in policy and analysis: being a part of the process itself. I want to contribute to the literature, perspectives, and policies that shape and reshape the political world. I am ready to be a participant, rather than a bystander. I can think of no better way to approach future scholarship and vocation in the study of politics and policy than as a firsthand participant in the efforts of the Endowment’s scholars.
China’s rapid growth has generated a great amount of anxiety in the United States. Some fear that conflict with China is inevitable. But others believe that such an outcome is not pre-ordained. Do you believe that China’s rise poses a long-term threat to the United States?

The rise of China is likely to be one of the most crucial developments affecting the global order in the 21st century. China, by virtue of its size, population and increasingly its economy, is shaping global events and interactions between various actors. This poses a key challenge, or maybe even an invaluable opportunity for the United States to bring to fruition its long-term efforts to integrate China into the international community, even as it continues to watch developments in China and their implications closely to identify any signs of potential confrontation or a major clash of interests.

Anti-China lobbies have always existed in the US since the Communists came to power in 1949. Recent developments that have given these lobbies ample ammunition to overplay the “China Threat” card include its rapid economic development, the much hyped-about controversy over exchange rate and trade balance issues, China’s increasing defense budget and growing military presence, its engagement with the established international norms, and its diplomatic globetrotting in search of raw materials and energy sources. Given these developments, it comes as no surprise that China is increasingly being viewed as a threat to US interests by many. However, these developments should not be taken to mean that conflict with China is inevitable. While some international relations theorists like John Mearsheimer believe that conflict is inevitable with a new rising power seeking its rightful place in the international system, there are various other factors in place that cause other China watchers to believe otherwise. To examine whether China’s rise poses a long-term threat to the United States, we must examine some key aspects of this issue in more detail.

First, let us consider the issue of China’s rise. Undoubtedly, China is rising. Economically, China has seen sustained annual GDP growth rates of 9-10% over the past couple of decades with the result that the size of its economy has quadrupled since Deng Xiaoping started reforms in 1978. With the hullabaloo about China’s exchange rate regime and the resulting trade imbalance along with the global shift in manufacturing activity to China, many now consider China to be threatening the sustainability of the competitiveness of the US economy in the world, drawing parallels with Japan during the 1980s. However, China’s per capita income still remains at very low levels. Having started from a very low base, China is nowhere close to the standards of living in place in developed countries like the United States. Despite this, it is clear that China is developing rapidly and as a Goldman Sachs report predicted, China’s economy in GDP terms could overtake the US by 2050. In a dire
situation, China could see an economic backlash from the US and vice versa, with increased protectionism potentially leading to a conflict that would eventually spill into the political and military spheres as well.

Politically, China has developed better relations with many countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, the European Union, and even in the US' own backyard, Latin America. Given that China's relations with these countries have improved out of economic imperatives (buying raw materials from these countries and serving as a market for them as well), it is important to note that China is leveraging its economic prowess to gain political favors as well such as greater recognition of the One China policy. In addition, as the dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the United States among its traditional allies rises due to its unilateral foreign policy, China is moving in to provide an alternative to these countries without harping on sensitive issues like political reform, democracy, human rights etc.

On the military front, China's military has undertaken various steps to modernize its capabilities and China's defense budget has been growing by double-digit figures for quite a few years now. It doesn't help pro-China lobbies that Chinese leaders have often adopted a very tough stance against Taiwan, passing an Anti-Secession law last year that irked many Taiwanese and Americans. While many argue that China's militarily capabilities will never match those of the US, an economically robust economy with greater resources to devote to military purposes could see the PLA emerge as a credible threat to the US military capabilities. Another key consideration is China's increasing demand of energy due to rapid economic development. Demand from China is considered to be one of the key factors behind the high oil prices that we are witnessing today. In addition, Chinese companies are seeking to buy oil fields in countries in Africa, Central Asia, and Russia etc. to satisfy its needs, paying scant regard to the political records of regimes like Sudan and Iran many of which are considered to be "rogue" states by the United States.

Next, we need to examine what a long-term threat to the United States would entail. A long-term threat implies that the threat would probably be realized in about 15-30 years. Any country, firm, or individual could be considered a threat to the United States if it challenges and threatens its national interests and prevents the achievement of US strategic objectives in the fields of economic, political and energy security as well as undermines the position of the United States as the sole superpower in the world today.

So, given what we know about China's rise, and assuming that this rise continues uninterrupted by major socio-economic or political upheaval (which many continue to argue is inevitable in China), does China
pose a long-term threat to the United States? Potentially, yes. Is conflict between the US and China inevitable? No. Analyzing this issue in terms of economic, political, military or strategic threat, we can conclude that on the economic front, China is likely to threaten the position of the US as the hub of economic activity in the world. In addition, as China continues to attract multinationals due to its low-cost labor, the US could continue to see further jobs being lost. If the issues of exchange rate and huge trade deficits in the US vis-à-vis China gain even more momentum and portray, rightly or wrongly, China as being the root cause of the economic malaise afflicting the US economy, we could see economically unwise measures being adopted by either or both countries.

Politically, as China develops its economic strength further, its interactions with the world might become even more assertive. While currently China avoids challenging key political objectives of the US, such as the war in Iraq, it could potentially begin throwing its political weight around, and leverage its better relations with many countries if the relations of the US with these countries continue to deteriorate. Militarily, it is highly unlikely that China will pose a credible threat to the strength of the US military. However, with the concerted efforts to develop a blue-water navy for the first time, China could potentially pose a credible threat to the US military position in the Taiwan Straits, an area where a US-China military conflict might actually materialize. China also intends to use its blue-water navy to protect the Straits of Malacca through which most of its oil imports flow. China and the US could potentially come into conflict as China's energy needs explode to the extent that it starts encroaching upon territories and oil fields that the US has traditionally secured its oil from, like Saudi Arabia and Venezuela.

Clearly, the potential for China posing a threat to the vital interests of the United States in the long term definitely exists. However, the strong economic ties that bind the US and Chinese economies raises the stakes of such a conflict actually escalating into war. The situation in the years ahead is likely to be different from the Cold War era. Neither the US nor China wants to see the destruction, or anything close to it, of the other country. It would mean economic suicide for both countries. The key lies in channeling the efforts of both countries in a way that prevents them from getting embroiled in a zero-sum competition over status, resources and influence. It is clear that successful management of relations between these two countries will be crucial to maintain stability in the world in the coming decades. Restraint, diplomacy, constructive dialogue and understanding of each others' positions will prove critical in managing what probably is, and will most likely continue to be, the most crucial bilateral relationship in the world.
Good policies are not Procrustean beds. U.S. policymakers must accommodate reality in constructing strategies and approaches, and they must acknowledge that context dictates effective tactics. Yet U.S. policymakers have not exercised this responsibility in their approaches to the Arab world, and they have allowed a disposition towards democratic consolidation to adversely affect both their policies and, more importantly, their expectations for success. There exists a key contextual contrast that U.S. policymakers have not yet widely accepted: whereas in many parts of Latin America, East Asia, Africa and Central and Eastern Europe, the U.S. promoted democracy by aiding consolidation in a transition or post-transition context, there is no such extant democratic framework in the predominantly authoritarian Arab world. Put simply, U.S. policymakers would be ill advised to treat the Arab world as they have treated other regions where the effects of democratic transition were present already. First, policymakers must acknowledge the reality of this context and, second, they must pursue a robust policy of engagement to help create institutions essential to democracy that are now largely absent in the Arab world.

Authoritarianism in the Arab world has proven remarkably resilient to challenges and shocks over the past two centuries. Where democracy has shown signs of development elsewhere, it has shown few signs of viability and life in the Middle East and North Africa. Israel and Lebanon are exceptions in the region rather than the rule. In the former-Soviet states, and in much of Latin America, Africa, and East Asia, U.S. policymakers were faced with the challenge of democratic consolidation during or after a significant transition. These transitions created a context of potentially viable democracy. Democracy, one might say, was “in the air” as the prevailing conceptual framework for future governmental development. We saw this to be the case after the collapse of the Soviet Union, after post-colonial independence in some African states, through various military coups and student uprisings in South Korea, and through the collapse of military regimes in parts of
Latin America. The democratic context was often already a feature of the political topography when U.S. policymakers addressed how best to promote democracy, and successes in places such as Poland and South Korea led these policymakers to take such a topography for granted.

This has created a disposition among U.S. policymakers towards consolidation, and failures in Iraq since 2003 have made this clearer than ever before. True, the U.S. did initiate the transition, but U.S. policy quickly shifted towards premature democratic consolidation despite the lack of a complete transition. This was evident, for example, when the Iraqi army was disbanded, compromising Iraq's ability to maintain security, and elections were pressed into the foreground of political discourse before the state possessed essential institutions with respect to such issues as domestic security and energy infrastructure. Though it is not the first example that has done so, Iraq has shown us that even forcefully toppling an authoritarian regime does not ensure that a democratic framework will take root. Policymakers have failed to recognize the impotence of promoting democratic learning in an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian context when compared to comparable efforts in a nascent democratic context. In other words, this disposition towards consolidation has skewed expectations of success by causing policymakers to believe that consolidation efforts will work where such efforts are actually inappropriate.

Two modifications must be applied to policies in the Arab world; the first applies to analytic expectations, the second to policy approaches. First, the authoritarianism of the Arab world has proven resilient to both exogenous and endogenous shocks or trends that might lead to the emergence of a democratic framework. The entrenchment of elite-driven politics and a refusal to embrace free market policies are important contributing factors to this resilience. Democratic transitions, it follows, are not guaranteed and, even if they were, they are difficult to predict, meaning we must treat the "pre-transitional" (to use an inherently biased term) character of the Arab world as a fixture rather than as an anomaly that will soon erode.
Second, the fact that the U.S. has extensive experience in democratic consolidation does not mean that we should apply this experience unconditionally to the Arab world. Democracy promotion entails building essential institutions, such as dependable police forces, judicial systems, and educational organizations, many of which are absent in Arab states. U.S. policymakers will not encourage the creation and expansion of such institutions through hostile rhetoric and condemnations of Arab governments, but through engagement with the elites who hold power in these states. This entails continued humanitarian efforts as well as gradually creating incentive structures, i.e. through careful diplomatic and economic pressure and engagement, which encourage elites to make concessions benefiting the growth of these essential institutions. The U.S. should not adopt a policy of appeasement, but it must recognize the implications of promoting literacy, metaphorically speaking, where elites decide which books are on the shelves.

Furthermore, the U.S. should recognize that creating these incentive structures is something that it cannot do on its own. Policymakers should make their democracy promotion plans more robust by incorporating a strategy to improve U.S. relations with Europe. Unilateral incentive structures offered by the U.S. will be ignored if Arab elites can afford to do so by turning elsewhere for support and resources. Better U.S.-Europe cooperation could limit the scope of these alternatives.

The modifications I recommend largely concern prevailing attitudes that are misleading. The reality on the ground is that the Arab world is not at a stage where the lessons of democratic consolidation are relevant and applicable. When this is acknowledged and accepted, U.S. policymakers can begin the difficult process of constructing approaches to the Arab world with more reasonable, though not certain, expectations of success.