

# Politics & Diplomacy

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## America in the Age of Geodiplomacy

Parag Khanna

In all corners of the world—from ministries in Latin America to elite London social clubs, from Gaza refugee camps to the streets of Karachi—vocal, passionate, and sometimes violent resistance is being expressed against the United States’s perceived hegemony. Whether the United States preserves or undermines stability, perpetrates or prevents violence, nurtures or hinders social and economic development, the United States’s universal presence tends to invite backlash.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of whether one views this presence as legitimate, September 11, 2001 unequivocally resolved any question of whether the United States would engage with the world or isolate itself from foreign commitments and “entangling alliances.”

The United States’s geopolitical stature has been ascribed to its military might, economic dominance, leadership in the creation and management of multilateral institutions, and its cultural “soft power.” During the Cold War, the symbols of American strength—from NATO warplanes to product advertising—won allies and undermined Soviet communism. With the end of the Cold War, the context in which these symbols are perceived has changed drastically. Today, U.S. military might is widely regarded as intrusive, its economic dominance as exploitative, its manipulation of international organizations as self-serving, and its cultural ubiquity as arrogant. If percep-

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tion reflects reality, an updated strategy to communicate the United States's multifaceted commitments, goals, and

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intentions is critical. But persuasive communication by itself will be neither the foundation for more effective policies nor the savior of ineffective ones. In both redefining and reasserting itself globally, the United States must: engage international institutions to win support; fully recognize the world's contradictory views of the United States; express its policies coherently and consistently; and devise new diplomatic strategies, beyond coercion and propaganda, to understand and respond to the concerns of others. Moreover, these goals can be accomplished in a manner consistent with a realist view of the national interest.

The new global context of world affairs is Geodiplomacy, the nexus of geopolitics and diplomacy. Geopolitics is no longer limited to states nakedly pursuing their self-interest. Rather, it encompasses a wide range of actors from the private sector, civil society, the media, labor movements, and religious communities who influence decisions of global significance. Diplomacy today encompasses official contacts far beyond accredited ambassadors, as evidenced by the existence of "public" and "track-two" diplomacies. Geodiplomacy is the result of this systemic transformation of world politics into a global political process.<sup>2</sup>

Many new actors influence Geodiplomacy, and they are redefining norms from the ground-up. If consensus on

govern the emerging global polity is even more tentative. For example, the U.S. Department of State defines terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups."<sup>3</sup> In January, however, Islamic scholars put forward a different definition: "All acts of aggression committed by individuals, groups or states against human beings, including attacks on their religion, life, intellect or property."<sup>4</sup> In the war against global terrorism, these scholars, whose support is critical to curb radicalism, have defined the United States as a terrorist state—an inauspicious start to a long campaign. Similarly, warfare has traditionally been understood as open and armed hostility between combatants of sovereign states. But a recent Chinese treatise suggested that war "transcends all boundaries and limits...using all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one's interests."<sup>5</sup> We are no longer able to universally distinguish between terrorism and war, a precarious and unsustainable situation where both are employed in the name of anybody's justice.<sup>6</sup> So long as there is no victory on the semantic battlefield in defining war and terrorism—and hence no mutual understanding of what we are fighting for or against—both the struggle against

perpetrators of hyper-violent acts and global perceptions of the United States's intentions will face a dim fate.

Military victory is impossible in this conceptual battle. In the face of new ideological challenges, it would be fatalistic to ascribe the divergence of the United States's world-view from that of other nations as merely the product of power relationships which, by traditional realist logic, naturally generate balancing antagonisms.<sup>7</sup> This approach also underestimates the humanistic and psychological dimensions of power, the arenas in which public diplomacy seeks to advance the United States's global agenda. As the most powerful nation in the world, the United States may well remain the most resented actor. However, by leading the world from within the framework of international institutions rather than as a unilateralist hegemon, it can accomplish long-term objectives while showing a "decent respect for the opinions of mankind."

**A New American Diplomacy.** In the United States, 9/11 is viewed as "world changing", but in Europe it is viewed as "America changing." The United States may not always be satisfied with lengthy, consensus-driven negotiations, but there is a two-fold danger in flouting international processes: It perpetuates the vicious cycle of their ineffectiveness, and it may help those with less-than-benign intentions to undermine international law. In the arena of Geodiplomacy, if the United States is to win support from foreign governments, the media, and citizens, it must first strive to achieve consensus on definitions and objectives. It must make a bona fide commitment to contribute to strength-

ening, not undermining, international society in the long-term.<sup>8</sup>

Numerous examples confirm that international institutions command respect from a substantial portion of the world, even in the United States, but current U.S. policy blatantly undercuts this respect. Rumbblings of an unsanctioned invasion of Iraq have stirred suspicion amongst even our closest allies. Yet, on September 12, 2002, President Bush urged the United Nations to take responsibility for enforcing its resolutions, so frequently violated by Iraq. This appeal stimulated speculation that, by addressing the world with consensus-building aims, President Bush may have even brought the United Nations closer to the United States.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice asserted that national interest and the interests of an "illusory international community" are ever-conflicting.<sup>10</sup> This is an a priori rejection of the very logic of diplomacy, of compelling others' interests to conform to your own. How odd, then, that President Bush demonstrated such implicit support for the international community by calling upon the United Nations to act authoritatively.

It is important to recognize that Bush's multilateral appeal was not merely a rhetorical exercise. Rather, it was essential to gaining support from key military allies in the Gulf. Days after President Bush's speech to the United Nations, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, committed to allowing the United States to use Saudi bases in the context of UN-mandated action against Iraq, a patent shift in Saudi posture. He emphasized that a UN resolution meant that "everybody is obliged to follow through."<sup>11</sup> It was ultimately talk of a UN resolution that aid-

ed the United States in its quest for forward positions in the Middle East. The United States had originally asserted a policy of outright “regime change” in Iraq, but apparently President Bush’s national security team conceded that compliance with UN resolutions should take precedence. Whether invading Iraq or fighting terrorists, the United States will need allies who consider it in their national interest to support American leadership of the international community. There is thus a logical, realist basis for U.S. engagement with the international community.

Applying the insight gained from the above experience more broadly, it should become more common for U.S. policymakers to build scenarios around international perceptions and responses to the United States’s policy options into the foreign policymaking apparatus, a firm step in the direction of reconciling national interest with international norms.<sup>12</sup> Though UN Security Council mandates may not be a transcendent moral force, they remain the (current) legitimate mechanism for harmonizing interests of great and small powers alike. Even China and Russia—the two great powers most protective of their sovereignty—demand that any military action against Iraq be sanctioned by the United Nations. The United States’s role is to lead in forging consensus, not to remain mired in short-term considerations. The adoption of UN Resolution 1441, reflecting a United States–France compromise on weapons inspections in Iraq combined with the threat of force, represents a breakthrough in balancing American leadership with international consultation.

In the long run, the United States actually has little choice but to seek interna-

tional consensus. Together, a global war against terrorism, a unilateral invasion of Iraq, and permanent commitments in Europe, Israel, and East Asia represent unsustainable military expenditures. They also bring losses to American “ideological credit” incurred through “arrogant arm-twisting.”<sup>13</sup> There is a false perception among American elites that “the United States remains the unrivaled leader of the world—the big power, which makes its share of mistakes, but without which nothing good happens.”<sup>14</sup> In reality, the U.S. abstention from numerous international treaties and conventions means that much good in the world happens, not only without, but also in spite of, the United States.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, the United States championed the notion of the International Criminal Court, but backed away as legal ramifications emerged. By participating carefully in the drafting of charters, the United States could keep these institutions honest by preventing corruption of terms such as terrorism and war crime, thereby furthering the vital, cultural goal of delegitimizing global terrorism. However, President Bush’s new *National Security Strategy* presupposes collective agreement on threat perception and legitimate response. It overlooks concerns that, in its intimations concerning Iraq, the United States is masking preemption in the language of prevention. Only a multilateral path will allow President Bush to win international support and make progress towards common understandings.

**Public Diplomacy, not Public Relations.** Public diplomacy will only be effective if an understanding of foreign cultures and ideas directly affects the policymaking process. Soft power should facilitate acceptance of American policies, not serve as their substitute. The

United States cannot be perceived as fighting a public relations battle with the limited aim of avenging the terrorist attacks of September 11. Sadly, as justified as the United States is in demanding punishment for all parties involved in planning those tragic attacks, 52 percent of respondents to an *Al-Ahram* survey felt that the United States “deserved it.”<sup>16</sup> Anti-American boycotts, and even terrorism, in the Arab world are symptoms of protest against American policies in the Middle East. Although the United States already benefits enormously from the commercial appeal of its cultural exports, “soft power” is no solution to geopolitical conflicts or interests.

They are like one-way streets. Effective cultural exchange, by contrast, depends on engaging others in dialogue.”<sup>18</sup>

Fortunately, the American population is interested in such dialogue. In fact, it seems that the Bush administration’s tone alienates U.S. citizens just as much as *Al-Ahram’s* Middle Eastern respondents. Eighty percent of Americans support UN involvement in any action against Iraq, an internationalist reflex ignored by policymakers, whose election outcomes do not hinge on foreign policy decisions. By ignoring American instincts for fairness and equality, policymakers appear, as it were, *less* worldly than the population they represent. Cit-

## **In the war** against global terrorism, scholars, whose support is critical to curb radicalism, have defined the United States as a terrorist state.

Current communications strategies are failing not despite but because of multinational communication companies who convey a consumerist and decadent image of the United States. The adage may declare that advertising is only as good as the product being sold, but in this case, the product is only perceived to be as good as the advertising. The founder of ElectronicIntifada.net, Ali Abunimah, has said, “People here really do feel that support for Sharon is wrong and that war against Iraq is wrong. No amount of spinning is going to change that.”<sup>17</sup> The Cold War success of publicizing symbols of U.S. wealth and excess engenders in traditional, developing societies sentiments ranging from humiliation and envy to resentment and anger. One observer noted, “advertising messages in themselves have so little bite.

izen exchanges—such as high school exchange programs and journalistic exchanges between NBC and MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Corporation)—prove to be far more fruitful in building trust between cultures than overt propaganda strategies. They also act as a positive, durable springboard for improving cultural relations. This is undoubtedly the case with Seeds of Peace, a program that began by bringing Palestinian and Israeli youth to summer camps in Maine to confront the “other.” These adolescents, the future leaders of their societies, usually leave as friends, more understanding of each other’s views and less likely to perpetrate violence against each other. This is the true nature of public diplomacy: understanding root causes and addressing them through concrete programs.

Furthermore, U.S. citizens lead the world in civic engagement, and in philanthropic and charitable giving. However, few resources are currently devoted to the tremendously important task of encouraging U.S. involvement in promotion of global norms such as freedom of speech and human rights. More involvement would deepen U.S. exposure to the global processes that are the necessary architecture for future world order.

But the messenger is as important as the message. The United States is a long way from gaining the trust of Arab leaders and elites. Yet, their support and contact with domestic media and society

surely stimulate freedom of speech, but the diplomatic task of communicating American values and strategy among policymakers and influential elite around the world remains paramount. If the United States wishes to promote what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations,” it will have to make clear that “political and economic reform will be an integral part of the ongoing U.S. agenda with its Arab friends—a constant issue in diplomatic exchanges, a subject for congressional scrutiny, and a component of U.S. assistance programs.”<sup>20</sup>

Let us remember that anti-American-

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would contribute far more to reducing hatred of the United States than American efforts would. Winning the trust of citizens, political leaders, business executives, and the media will accomplish far more in restoring confidence in the United States’s relations with the Arab and Islamic worlds than current priorities, such as the United States Congress’ pledge of a \$500 million investment in a 24-hour Arabic language satellite television station. Osama bin Laden’s use of *al-Jazeera* to fan the flames of anti-American hatred in the Arab world does not mean that a propaganda-dispensing U.S. satellite network will counter his success and win over disaffected Arabs. Would Americans trust Arab news if it were translated into English?<sup>19</sup>

A U.S. policy to encourage independent media in the Arab world would

ism is widespread even amongst our strategic allies, who rightly complain that they are overlooked in policy development and contacted only once decisions have been made. Analysts have attributed Gerhard Schroeder’s salvaging of his election victory to his promise not to commit German troops to an invasion of Iraq, sanctioned or otherwise. The distinction between legitimate anti-Americanism and political opportunism may be unclear here, but consider the response of German intellectuals to the widely circulated document “What We Are Fighting For,” signed by sixty prominent U.S. social scientists and lawyers: “The inviolability of human dignity applies not only to people in the United States, but also to people in Afghanistan, and even to the Taliban and the al Qaeda prisoners at Guan-

tanamo. Can we expect other nations and cultures to perceive the application of dual standards as anything but the expression of continuing Western arrogance and ignorance?"<sup>21</sup>

**Geodiplomatic Strategies.** The United States's struggle to define its role with respect to other countries, international institutions, and foreign actors clearly amounts to more than a polite difference of opinion amongst old friends. An emerging scholarship points to the "paradox of American power," the observation that globalization diminishes the United States's ability to achieve its goals alone. The power of voices criticizing the United States will grow with rising inequality and the proliferation of technology, forcing the United States to consider these opposing opinions. Hence, the United States, will increasingly need to respect the diversity of peoples, opinions, and rationalities across the globe. Geodiplomacy implies a sizeable proliferation in the number of assertive groups, claims to legitimacy, and sources of influence.

The success of American public diplomacy—and therefore of its foreign policy—will depend on its capacity to craft policies that contribute to long-term global stability and equality, engage in international institutions, and demonstrate respect for the world's many co-existing value systems. The existence of these multiple systems, some consumerist, others value-driven, and still others ideological, underpins the cultural basis driving the global shift toward Geodiplomacy. Feedback from public diplomacy efforts should be incorporated into policymaking to create a seamless diplomatic apparatus that

engages cultures and responds to changes in the world.

Americans with substantive understanding of different cultures around the world must take the lead in crafting policies sensitive to both national interest and global perceptions. For instance, Qatar's moderate foreign minister has stated that rebuilding relations between the Arab world and the West will require compromise from both sides. Meanwhile, senior American officials who repeatedly call for change and moderation in the Arab and Islamic worlds consistently omit any mention of a commensurate need for the United States to soften positions and demonstrate restraint. The United States is unique in that it is not a unified society in which all elements and sectors share, and are prepared to make sacrifices for, one common purpose. Deeper understanding of other cultures within the U.S. foreign policy establishment will allow it to more convincingly communicate why the United States's complex, multifaceted interests often generate friction with global opinion.

Fortunately, peace, democracy, and free markets are the foundations of a new global orthodoxy to which most states pay tribute, at least rhetorically. The United States has in many respects come to represent or to promote these values. However, it cannot successfully force their internalization by all cultures and societies of the world. Cultures may change rapidly, but they cannot be changed by acts of policy.<sup>23</sup> For these policies and values to be implemented universally, they must first be disassociated from the symbolism of the United States. Many may want the United States' wealth, power or prestige, but few actually want to *be* the United States.

The United States's strategy should therefore be *memetic*. It should allow these ideals to spread on their own merits, not as part of an Americanization package. This would divorce them from the vicissitudes of foreign perception of the United States. The United States should claim neither to have founded nor perfected democracy. Instead, it should speak of democracy as an empowering system that satisfies a fundamental human desire for recognition and voice. The virtue of the free market should be its efficiency in generating wealth, not the profits it brings to U.S. multinational corporations. The global "Generation Y" (ages 15-27) should be a vehicle that carries this message, not just its target. Youth today across the globe already share priorities and values more than any generation before. Youth need not have American political ideals imposed on them; rather, they should be empowered to adopt those which they hold to be right.

A memetic strategy inherently takes into account the enormous technological advantages the United States possesses in the arena of communications technology. John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt of the RAND Corporation have charted the shift from hierarchical to network-oriented systems both in science and society. They point to the emergence of a Noosphere, a "global 'realm of the mind,' which may have a profound impact on statecraft," with a corresponding *Noopolitik*, "undertaken as much by nonstate as by state actors, that emphasizes the role of informational soft power" and serves as "supplement and complement to *Realpoli-*

*tik*."<sup>24</sup> The vast majority of infrastructural nodes constituting cyberspace are located in the United States. Coupled with the continued dominance of ideas generated in U.S. universities and think-tanks, the potential for stronger cooperation between the diplomatic, scientific and academic spheres should be explored.<sup>25</sup>

Even those who intuitively prefer traditional approaches to measuring and exerting power should recognize the fragility of the current approach. Countries where U.S. diplomatic presence is weak can become terrorist havens, and this lack of engagement makes political solutions to tensions difficult. Furthermore, crippled diplomacy cannot deliver important information on local conditions which over-stretched intelligence agencies require.

The first step in adapting U.S. diplomacy to continuously evolving global circumstances will be to ensure that the current operations of offices charged with shaping policy serve complementary functions in both communicating the United States's policies and attempting to shape its global image. As the U.S. government begins to implement numerous strategies for communicating the war on terrorism and U.S. foreign policy more broadly, it should bear in mind the potent underlying cultural shifts that subtly, but noticeably, impact power dynamics in world politics.

**Author's Note:** The author welcomes comments at [pkhanna@brookings.edu](mailto:pkhanna@brookings.edu).



## NOTES

- 1 "Empire is emerging today as the center that supports the globalization of productive networks and casts its widely inclusive net to try to envelop all power relations within its world order—and yet at the same time it deploys a powerful police function against the new barbarians and the rebellious slaves who threaten its order." Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 20.
- 2 Parag Khanna, "Geodiplomacy," OECD Highlights, Paris, Summer 2002.
- 3 United States Department of State, "Patterns of Global Terrorism 2000," Internet, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2000/2419.htm> [Underline website-address] (Date accessed: 30 November 2002).
- 4 Scott MacLeod, "After the Fall," *TIME Europe*, 4 February 2002, p. 48.
- 5 Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui. *Unrestricted Warfare*. (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999).
- 6 "The question of the definition of justice and peace will find no real resolution; the force of the new imperial constitution will not be embodied in a consensus that is articulated in the multitude." Hardt and Negri, 20.
- 7 Robert Kagan, "Power and Weakness," *Policy Review*, no. 113 (June/July 2002).
- 8 "International society," as used by Hedley Bull in his classic *The Anarchical Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), encompassed and subsumed norms and actors beyond the international community of states.
- 9 Julia Preston, "Bush's Step toward U.N. Is Met by Warm Welcome," *New York Times*, 13 September 2002.
- 10 Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2000).
- 11 Todd S. Purdum, "Saudis Indicating U.S. Can Use Bases if U.N. Backs War," *New York Times*, 16 September 2002.
- 12 A recent Council on Foreign Relations Independent Task Force report further adds that public diplomacy should "adopt an 'engagement' approach that involves listening, dialogue, debate and relationship-building..." "Public Diplomacy: A Strategy for Reform," Internet, [http://www.cfr.org/PublicDiplomacy\\_TF.html](http://www.cfr.org/PublicDiplomacy_TF.html) (Date accessed: 30 November 2002).
- 13 Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Eagle has Crash Landed," *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2002, 68.
- 14 Thomas L. Friedman, "Going Our Way," *New York Times*, 15 September 2002.
- 15 The most recent examples include the ABM Treaty, Kyoto Protocol, International Criminal Court, Convention on the Rights of the Child and Convention on Anti-Personnel Mines.
- 16 "A Domestic Outlook on 9/11: Seeing Through it All," *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*.
- 17 Jane Perlez, "U.S. Trying to Market Itself to Young Arabs," *New York Times*, 16 September 2002.
- 18 Victoria de Grazia, "The Selling of The United States, Bush Style," *New York Times*, 25 August 2002, WK (4).
- 19 The Council on Foreign Relations Independent Task Force report concurs: "Certainly, negative attitudes toward the United States and its policies are more intense in the Middle East, where many people do not trust what we say because they feel our words are contradicted by our policies, particularly by our tolerance for autocratic regimes that are our friends in the region." Op. cit.
- 20 Martin Indyk, "Back to the Bazaar," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2002).
- 21 "A World of Justice and Peace Would be Different," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 May 2002 (originally published as "Eine Welt der Gerechtigkeit und des Friedens sieht anders aus").
- 22 Joseph S. Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 23 Michael Mandelbaum, "The Inadequacy of American Power," *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2002): 61-73.
- 24 David Rondfeldt and John Arquilla, "What If There is a Revolution in Diplomatic Affairs?" *United States Institute of Peace Virtual Diplomacy Report*, 25 February 1999.
- 25 A strategic framework for public diplomacy which articulates the potential benefits of this nexus is found in: Mark Leonard, "Diplomacy by Other Means," *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2002.