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## Book reviews and Notes

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# Selective Multilateralism as a US Strategy

John M. Owen\*

*At home abroad: identity and power in American foreign policy* / Henry R. Nau. – Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, c2002. – xiii, 314 p. – ISBN 0-8014-3931-0 (cloth)

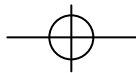
In the late 1980s, when many political scientists and historians were confidently predicting America's global economic and political decline, a few held fast and argued that the United States was, in the words of Joseph Nye, "bound to lead" the international system. Joining Nye was Henry R. Nau, who published *The myth of America's decline* in 1990. Nau argued that countries usually have more choices than "structuralists" and pessimists suppose. Most of the world had accepted the free market and democratic principles epitomised by the United States. Thus, if its leaders made the right choices, the US would continue in its leading role.

Events since 1990 have vindicated Nau. The vindication is ironic, inas-

much as he argues in this new book that the United States, under the Clinton administration, made some bad policy choices in the 1990s, for example, in treating Japan as a rival rather than a partner. Still, the Soviet collapse of 1991, America's strong economic growth between 1992 and 2001, and the evident shortcomings of the "Asian model" of economic development have silenced most talk of American decline. The US economy is currently stagnant, but the dominant talk around the world today – influenced to be sure by US military policy since 11 September 2001 – is of an American empire.

The notion that the United States is bent on subjugating the rest of the world baffles most Americans, who would rather their country mainly keep to itself, cooperating with others when necessary but by no means dominating them. The stark contrast in the perceptions of Americans and non-Americans is in large part due to the historical

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American tendency to be uncomfortable in the world. As Nau points out, Americans have traditionally thought of their country as exceptional: it was defined not around an ethnic group or a monarch, but around the idea of individual liberty. And liberty was perpetually opposed by some massive transnational movement, be it monarchism, autocracy, or communism. Americans knew they had allies in the fight for liberty, but their country was always constrained to struggle against a hostile world.

Nau argues that those days should finally be gone. Because more societies than ever practice the free market, democratic values America has championed, the United States is no longer exceptional. But Americans do not seem to realise this. The centuries-old project of promoting liberty is coming to fruition, and the United States should take advantage of this victory. In particular, the industrial democracies of Japan, Canada and the states of Western Europe are America's "permanent partners".

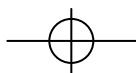
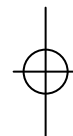
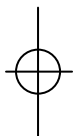
The assertion of permanent partnerships directly negates the realist aphorism of Viscount Palmerston that nations have "no permanent friends, only permanent interests". Yet, Nau is no cosmopolitan or, as he puts it, "traditional internationalist". With those countries that have yet to accept democratic capitalism, the United States (and other liberal states) exists in a realist world, where relative power matters and states balance against one another. Nau follows Immanuel Kant, then, who argued that "republics" or law-governed states are in a state of law with one another, but a Hobbesian or realist state

of nature with despotisms.

Nau's portrayal of the international system is more complex than Kant's, however: he distinguishes repressive states such as China, which continue to reject democracy, from partly-free states such as Russia. The Chinese and American identities overlap very little, and although the two countries need not be enemies, Washington must not confuse China for a permanent partner. Russian and American identities overlap more, and so Washington can cooperate more deeply with Moscow than with Beijing. Also in contrast to internationalists, Nau makes clear that foreign trade and investment presuppose a security order underwritten by a liberal hegemon.

In concrete terms, how would US policy differ under Nau's direction? Washington would treat fellow liberal democracies in Europe and Asia as partners, never as rivals, in economic and security affairs. It would rely more on multilateral institutions when dealing with this core group of liberal states. It would not be hostile toward Russia or China, but it would stop treating them as though they could be partners in the same sense; that is, no more Russian partnership with NATO, and in East Asia a Japanese-South Korean-US alliance. In Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa, Washington would encourage economic reforms as a way to increase identity convergence.

The central argument of *At home abroad* rests on firm empirical ground. Most IR scholars accept that liberal democracies almost never fight wars against one another, and the evidence is strong that they are also more likely



to be economically interdependent and to join international institutions. "Surely," as he writes in conclusion, for America, "going abroad, at least among these mature democracies, is like coming home" (253). And yet many regimes around the world do not share America's ends and cannot be regarded as permanent partners. The United States will make trouble for itself if it treats Tokyo exactly like Moscow, or Moscow exactly like Beijing.

A few questions haunt Nau's selectively multilateral program. Concerning economic relations, Nau rejects what he terms the "outward-first" approach, under which Washington negotiates with other states and then attempts to make domestic policy comply with the resulting agreements. Rather, the United States should begin with domestic policy changes – that is, deregulation or tighter fiscal policies – and then use its resulting enhanced competitiveness as leverage in international negotiations. Nau sees this "inward-first" approach as both more democratic and more likely to ensure that free market economics continue to triumph over the state-directed solutions that often emerge from international negotiations (112-14). Laudable though these goals are, other liberal democracies are liable to see an "inward-first" America as hegemon rather than partner.

Another question emerges from America's post-9/11 emphasis on security from terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. The world's liberal democracies do agree

on the fundamental ends of society and the means to secure those ends; but the threat of catastrophic terrorism has caused the importance of that agreement to recede in the American mind. Whether a given foreign country is liberal-democratic matters less to the Bush administration, and large sections of the American elite and public, than whether that country is helping the United States make itself more secure (assessed, naturally enough, according to US standards). That many of America's fellow liberal democracies do not make fighting terrorism their top priority, or disagree as to how best to fight terrorism, has made America care even less about common liberal identity. The notion of "permanent partnership" is distant from the thinking in Washington today.

Identity, then, seems a contingent notion, and current conditions seem to weaken transnational liberal-democratic identity. Nau provides a possible way to explore this complexity with his distinction between internal and external identity (21-24). A state's internal identity is grounded in its domestic institutions, while its external identity has to do with how inclined it is to use force against another state. The two types of identity overlap but are independent. What is needed now, more than ever, is an account of how countries that share an internal liberal identity can nonetheless become rivals, and how they might again come to see themselves as permanent friends.