

A NEW PARADIGM? PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES FOR U.S. GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT Throughout the years the overwhelming preponderance of US global leadership is debated by scholars and politicians. In light of the 'rise of the rest', this preponderance is either diminishing or still standing. As of now, yet again, the US is a dominant player both economically and militarily. However, economic recession is likely to make the United States put more emphasis on domestic problems and less emphasis on foreign challenges. Since political and economic landscape is swiftly changing overseas, the United States should act accordingly and cooperate with regional powers on issues of mutual interest. Similarly, as current development is under way in the Middle East, the United States should staunchly back Turkey as the regional hub in dealing with Syrian crisis and foiling Iranian menace.

Introduction

Whether the U.S. leadership is growing or diminishing is still debated in academics and politics, at home and abroad. From 1987 onward, starting from Paul Kennedy¹, many scholars embrace the idea that the United States is steadily in decline, whereas others argue that the attribution of utter decline to “imperial overstretch”, “relative decline” as the rise of the rest, and “absolute decline” (Nye, 2011, p. 156) is not new and thus, to some extent, far-fetched.

¹ For the first time, Paul Kennedy coined this phrase in his famous book “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers”, 1989.

Aftermath of World War II, the United States enjoyed its drastic economic growth and a predominant role in stretching its influence from Latin America to South East Asia. In addition, the Cold War provided the U.S. with an enormous impetus to form alliances and fight against the adversary in different fronts. After the triumph over communism, albeit not often, the United States proceeded to exercise its Cold War strategy and rhetoric. In the meantime, the United States tended to underestimate the impact of the emerging political and economic landscape with the sweeping effect of globalization on nations around the globe. After the demise of the Soviet Union, although the Clinton administration partially succeeded in establishing the U.S. leadership through cooperation and engagement, the eight-

year Bush Administration, notably the “war on terror” brought it to the Cold War nadir. Dividing the world into two fronts and preaching, “you are either with us or against us”, generated hatred and vengeance across the globe. From 2000 to 2007, there was a remarkably growing trend of apprehension on the United States even among the public of traditional NATO allies.²

Apart from politics, the American model is no longer appealing to outsiders. As Kenneth Rogoff, a Harvard economist, puts it: “. . . the rest of the world is no longer willing to sit quietly and be lectured by the United States . . .” (The New York Times, 2009). Nevertheless, the U.S. still holds its primacy in world affairs. Both economically and militarily, the U.S. is yet again a dominant player. Another spectrum of the debate encompasses the future of American power in light of “the rise of the rest” (Zakaria, 2008). Some of the noted scholars question whether America will be holding its primacy in the new world. To elaborate, the paper will present two factors that contribute to the United State’s ability to sustain its role as a global leader and two factors that weaken its ability to play a leadership role in the foreseeable future.

Optimistic Views

To begin with an optimistic view, the United States will sustain its role as a global leader thanks to its *economic*

² For detailed information, see Steven Hook and John Spanier “American Foreign Policy Since World War II”, 18th ed., 2010, p. 348.

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strength, military power and institutional capacity. For the last 60 years, the U.S. made enormous breakthrough in building financial institutions, strengthening NATO and overseeing the global market. Although, as of now, it suffers from the economic recession, its “output still amounts to roughly one-quarter of the world total, and its military spending exceeds that of all other countries combined” (Hook, 2010, p. 348). Apart from that military expenditure in light of recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which is regarded as the accumulation of national debt, in fact did not exceed one percent of GDP as opposed to Vietnam War which accounted for “. . . 1.6 percent of American GDP in 1970 . . .” (Zakaria, 2011, p. 199). Similarly, Robert Kagan argues that the U.S. deployed more troops and invested more resources in 1950s and 1960s, for military expenditure cannot be attributed “. . . as a major contributor to the soaring fiscal deficits that threaten the solvency of the national economy” (Kagan, 2012, p. 128). As an elaboration, he points out that “even the most draconian cuts in the defense budget would produce annual savings of only \$50 billion to \$100 billion, a small fraction – between 4 and 8 percent – of the \$1.5 trillion in annual deficits the United States is facing” (Kagan, 2012, p. 129).

Furthermore, recently a number of scholars and politicians echo rising China and its repercussion for the United States in the years to come. The belief that China will soon exceed the U.S. in terms of economic growth is highly far-fetched. In today’s growth rate, China should spend

two decades to reach the U.S. economic level. Chinese income per capita is roughly \$7,400, whereas the U.S. income per capita exceeds that of Chinese almost four times, containing \$28,500. Militarily, China would need approximately the same time span to level the U.S. military might (Etzioni, 2012, p. 63).

Similarly, in light of rising China, it is still debated whether economic power signifies military power. Joseph Nye argues that “the United States was the world’s largest economy for 70 years before it became a military superpower” (Nye, 2011). Hence he casts his doubt that “geo-economics” had indeed replaced geopolitics. “Military power . . . requires a thriving economy. But whether economic or military resources produce more power in today’s world depends on the context” (Nye, 2011). Nye points out that both economic and military power are of paramount importance, referring to Obama’s Nobel Prize speech “There will be times when nations – acting individually or in concert – will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified.”

The second factor that will contribute to the U.S. leadership is a *strategic necessity*. Even though regional powers emerge in different continents, the United States will be holding its primacy since regional powers still lack a capacity to play this role and thereby will want the U.S. presence. However, this will most likely be manifested in a non-traditional pattern – no imposition and coercion, but cooperation. Evidently, this will also benefit the United States since it cannot deal with the global challenges alone. As former Senator Obama made it clear in his 2007 *Foreign Affairs* piece that “America cannot meet

this century’s challenges alone; the world cannot meet them without America” (Obama, 2007). To elaborate, he retrospectively analyzed the need for America around the globe and the breakthrough the United States made thus far, spelling out “today, we are again called to provide visionary leadership” (Obama, 2007).

Nevertheless, interests of major countries are namely compatible than competitive in the new world. Rigid communist and non-communist blocs do not exist any longer. Relatively, most countries share the same values, such as democracy, human rights, peace, and free market. However, what the U.S. is not keen to

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digest is to accept the reality – emergence of different powers around the globe. The only survival for the United States is to cooperate with every single power on issues of mutual interests, and promote

peace and security at home and overseas. The Cold War way of conduct is no longer efficient. Nor does it yield any counterbalancing result. Even in 1990s Huntington predicted that “neither globalism nor isolationism, neither multiculturalism nor unilateralism will best serve American interests” (Huntington, 1996). Similarly, today Krauthammer argues that “the danger of democratic globalism is its universalism, its open-ended commitment to human freedom, its temptation to plant the flag of democracy everywhere.” Hence, he calls for “democratic realism”, whereby “we [the United States] will support democracy everywhere, but we will commit blood and treasure only in places where there is a strategic necessity – meaning, places central to the larger war against the existential enemy, the enemy

that poses a global mortal threat to freedom” (Krauthammer, 2004).

Pessimistic Views

Whereas the pessimistic view is that the U.S. *vision and strategy* are outdated. Twenty first century will not mark a rivalry of ideologies, but interests, not territorial expansion, but acquisition of resources. Failure in Iraq raised many questions with regard to the necessity and efficiency of the war. From preparation to implementation of the “war on terror”, there were a number of fatal flaws. Many argue that the Iraq and Afghanistan wars were redundant and too costly. Even 2011 Senate Foreign Relations Committee report indicates that “much of the aid to Afghanistan was wasted or remains unaccounted for, and the money’s positive effects were short-lived and distorted the Afghan economy, polity and society” (Etzioni, 2012, p. 60).

Worst of all, failure in Iraq and Afghanistan will better serve Iran and other “unfriendly” countries to further their interests in the region and bring anti-American forces to an alliance. It seems that “the mission is accomplished” for them.

Bush’s “freedom agenda” outlined that “it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world” (Bush, 2005). As Lindsay observed “democracy promotion often conflicted with other important U.S. foreign policy goals, most notably countering terrorism” (Lindsay, 2011, p. 770). Cooperation on terrorism outweighed the significance of

the U.S. pressure on autocratic governments to implement democratic reforms. Further, as Lindsay argues, “democracy could produce governments hostile to U.S. interests” (Lindsay, 2011, p. 770). Hamas coming to power changed the discourse and challenged the “freedom agenda”. On the eve of the Arab Awakening, the U.S. backed Mubarak virtually until after he was toppled down. Evidently, democracy and human rights were and still are manipulated to meet certain ends. In

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retrospect, Huntington observed that “democracy is promoted, but not if it brings Islamic fundamentalists to power; nonproliferation is preached for Iran and Iraq, but not for Israel; free trade is the elixir of economic

growth, but not for agriculture; human rights are an issue with China, but not with Saudi Arabia; aggression against oil-owning Kuwaitis is repulsed with massive force, but not so aggression against oil-less Bosnians . . .” (Huntington, 1996).

The Department of Defense’s recently released strategy “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21th Century Defense” states that “our [U.S.’s] global responsibilities are significant; we cannot afford to fail.” However, Paul Kennedy argued more than two decades ago that “imperial overstretch”, whereby military expenditure was exceedingly increasing in light of the Vietnam war, puts America at peril. In this regard, the second flaw is associated with excessive confidence on *unilateral approach* and ignorance of global support, which showed that even American economic and military superpower is thus far incapable of overcoming terrorism. In other words, it is a costly failure. Instead, the U.S. should revamp its

mission and revise its conventional strategy based on rivalry. As Kupchan et al. suggest, the U.S. should “encourage others to assume a larger geopolitical role” (Kupchan et al., 2007, p. 42).

Democrats agree that “excessive use of force creates an anti-American sentiment and encourages terrorism” (Kupchan et al., 2007, p. 39). Thus, most people echo that the United States should not get involved in tackling energy-consuming global problems. Like the Vietnam syndrome and apprehension, the recent poll shows that 72 percent of the American young believe that the U.S. should not “take the lead in solving global crisis” (Kupchan et al., 2007, p. 40).

In light of the “war on terror”, the U.S. aspiration to oust authoritarian regimes and eradicate terrorism, thus far, did not yield an expected result in terms of dealing with radicalization in general, and uprooting terrorism in particular. Importing democracy to Afghanistan and Iraq brought about turmoil in political system, disaster to social cohesion and schism to communal and religious diversity.

As of now, anti-American sentiment is increasing and is mainly manifested in the idea that “the West’s responsibility is to secure its own interests, not to promote those of other peoples nor to attempt to settle conflicts between other peoples when those conflicts are of little or no consequence to the West” (Huntington, 1996). The long-lasting belief that “culture of the West is and ought to be the culture of the world” failed and “Coca-colonization” did not transform Oriental values into Occidental ones. As Huntington puts it: “China is clearly modernizing, but certainly not westernizing” (Huntington, 1996). For the economic boom, East

Asians believe that they owe to their own values they adhere to, not Western values that are subliminally imported. Huntington elaborates that Asians perceive that “what is universalism to the West is imperialism to the rest” (Huntington, 1996).

The question is not whether U.S. as an imperial power will collapse or not, but whether U.S. will sustain its unipolar role. Stephen Walt argues that the “unipolar moment” is about to end. Hence, we will observe “either a bipolar Sino-American rivalry or a multipolar system containing several unequal great powers” (S. Walt, 2011, p. 4). Oddly enough, the DoD’s 21th century priority paper only now emphasizes the need to assess “the U.S. defense strategy in light of the changing geopolitical environment and changing fiscal circumstances” (Department of Defense, 2012).

With the President Obama in power and daunting tasks on the table, shift in the course is visible. When President Obama attended G-20 summit in London as part of his official visit three years ago, Robert Gibbs, the White House spokesman, said that the President “is going to listen in London, as well as to lead” (The New York Times, 2009). Obama observed that if the United States emphasized common interests “at the margins, they [other countries] are more likely to want to cooperate than not cooperate” (Lindsay, 2011, p. 778). Obama’s advisor called it “leading from behind”. New York Times depicted the overall picture as the following: “The challenges stem in part from lingering unhappiness around the world at the way the Bush administration used American power. But they have been made more intense by the sense in many capitals that the United States is no longer

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in any position to dictate to other nations what types of economic policies to pursue — or to impose its will more generally as it intensifies the war in Afghanistan and extracts itself from Iraq” (The New York Times, 2009).

Likewise, having understood the regional shift in power dynamics, the United States tends to see Latin America as a self-sustaining region. Hence, in April 2009, Washington’s Latin America policy emphasized mutual respect and outlined a vision of equal partnerships and joint responsibility (Crandall, 2011, p. 83). Similarly, current developments in the Greater Middle East, notably growing unrest in Syria and shackled nuclear program of Iran steadily increase Turkey’s regional weight to overcome regional challenges of global impact.

Conclusion

In retrospect, it is generally argued that as the sole power the Bush’s “war on terror” proved that American power is incapable of tackling enormous challenges beyond its border. Unlike Bush, Obama understands these challenges, and preaches that “navigating this more complex world required listening to others and giving them a stake in upholding the international order” (Lindsay, 2011, p. 778). However, Lindsay suspects that “*more* cooperation” with others would lead to “*enough* cooperation” for the United States. Hence, the U.S. concern should not be whether it will lose its leadership role in the years to come. Rather, as Lindsay observes, the concern should be “how to promote U.S. interests in a world that often will not automatically respond to U.S. leadership even as the United States remains the single most powerful and influential country” (Lindsay,

2011, p. 779). By and large, most countries of the new world welcome the U.S. leadership, albeit diminishing, in dealing with global challenges. Even the recent Libya operations showed that U.S.’s “preponderance of power” cannot be excluded since “they [European NATO allies] were neither accustomed to leading nor necessarily capable of it” (Lindsay, 2011, p. 779). However, Lindsay warns that “unless Obama finds a way to align his foreign policy prescriptions with evolving global trends, the gap between American aspirations and accomplishments will grow, and the prospects for successful U.S. global leadership will dim further” (Lindsay, 2011, p. 779).

Regardless of the affiliation of the next U.S. President, he will definitely choose to invest more time on domestic problems and less time on challenges in international affairs. Not surprisingly, along with the emphasis on decline of American leadership in the years to come, the National Intelligence Council’s “Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World” paper highlights a similar projection “Shrinking economic and military capabilities may force the U.S. into a difficult set of tradeoffs between domestic versus foreign policy priorities” (National Intelligence Council, 2008).

Hence, since the political and economic landscape is swiftly changing, the United States should change its Cold War rhetoric and revamp its outdated strategy, and cooperate with regional powers on issues of mutual interest. To this end, the United States should not necessarily utilize its hard power, but soft power to collaborate with regional powers and emerging markets. In addition, since the United States is expected to lag behind economically and militarily in the years to come, it is more than reasonable for the

United States to avoid unilateral action and embrace global support. Only will global support help overcome common enemy.

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