

America's Place in a Changing World

By Richard Sobel

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has sought to redefine its prominent place as a global force. By virtue of its strength and history, the US now monopolizes superpower status without much engagement. From Greenwich to Kyoto, Cape Town to Vladivostok, Santiago to Thule, the world awaits a resurgence of American leadership. A wise combination of American economic, diplomatic, and military policies could set the basis for an as yet unrealized new role in the world.

Although America has recently been credited with significant individual foreign policy successes, they don't constitute a coherent policy. In Haiti, the Middle East and North Korea, the US has helped defuse a series of crises. It has consistently supported the democratization of Russia and Eastern Europe. US intervention even turned

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Bosnia, after years of delay prompted largely by a desire to avoid a disaster, into a notable foreign policy achievement. Yet for the most part, the US only manages turbulent events and crises until they demand resolution. Beneficial outcomes at best result from ad hoc attention rather than leadership or vision.

Part of the difficulty in defining a new global role for the US lies in how the world has changed. The bipolarity of the East-West struggle no longer provides an axis for every conflict. Fortunately, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet empire and the downfall of dictatorships in Eastern Europe and Latin America, proto-democracies and free markets have emerged. Repressive governments and the specter of nuclear war have receded significantly. The very absence of cold war and catastrophe provides the space for developing forward-looking actions in a newly complicated world system.

The Domestic Politics of Foreign Policy

Since democracies rarely fight each other, this enlarged community of nations provides a stronger basis for peace. Americans increasingly perceive their well-being as more dependent on the economy than on the military, and post-Cold War competition generally has been playing out economically within an enlarged capitalist system. A more unified Europe and allies in Asia, such as Japan, have become intense commercial rivals.

However, post-Cold War American foreign policy has also become increasingly intertwined with domestic politics. With the globalization of markets, trade policy has become both foreign and domestic policy, and Americans have come to recognize that free and fair trading among partners sets a basis for largely peaceful and prosperous relations.

As the outside world has become the inside world, foreign policy has taken on a self-interested and domestic cast. Although Americans continue to believe in an active role in world affairs and to support humanitarian involvements, even with US troops, a multilateral pragmatism steels that belief, and an isolationist impulse, especially among insurgent elites, periodically reemerges. Global competition threatens some American workers whose representatives try to protect their old standard of living rather than work together to establish the basis for a new. Resting, too, at the intersection of domestic and foreign affairs, immigration policy has become the focus of fears rather than a source of forward-looking recognition that different people contribute to a changing world.

US Intervention

Although US military intervention continues to be the touchstone of an assertive US role in the world, aggressive action now occurs within a hybrid form. On the one hand, unilateral US armed involvement is anathema to people and politicians alike; intervention must be a multilateral effort. On the other hand, the US insists upon commanding, even when it will not lead. And at still other times, America won't lead in the face of allied reluctance to follow.

The persistence of the post-Vietnam syndrome among the American military and cautious politicians has obscured the recognition that the unwillingness to act often raises the cost to the victims, the world and US prestige. Moreover, the credible if vague threat that the US will lead a multilateral coalition is one of the strongest deterrents against aggression and oppression. As the Gulf War, Haiti and Bosnia have all revealed, well conceived uses of force can be effective.

When intervention constitutes a successful investment in future peace and stability, it need not simply serve a narrow national interest to be advisable and humane. The understandable reluctance of the US public and politicians can be overcome by intelligently thought-out and justified actions that contribute successfully to the national interest.

Still, the US public and leaders often—and correctly—prefer to let problems play themselves out without direct US involvement when others can manage well enough alone. The US cannot and ought not do everything or intervene everywhere. The US needs to consider the risks and consequences for it, other nations, and the international system of any action or inaction.

When the US acts, it sensibly insists on multilateral involvement, focusing increasing demands on the United Nations for interventions as well as for needed reforms. Yet US dues to the UN remain far in arrears. American leaders and the media need to represent accurately the costs and benefits of aid and investments in the well-being of other nations and in cooperation with multilateral organizations.

After the coalition victory in the Gulf released the pent-up energies of the East-West struggle, George Bush promised but quickly retreated from pursuing a new world order. Under Warren Christopher and Bill Clinton, the US muddled through crises with little policy direction. In trying to focus single-mindedly on domestic politics and economics, the President and his administration avoided focusing on world affairs whenever possible. In short, America's visible role in the world has remained prominent but confused.

Policy in the Future: Focus on Former and Future Superpowers

As US policy moves toward the future, it is likely to continue to center on actual or potential superpowers. Russia remains, of course, a primary focus of American policy attention. The Russian transition to democracy and a market economy have moved forward more surely than the lack of democratic tradition, inadequate outside monetary assistance, and a crisis of leadership might have predicted. America and the rest of the world have been fortunate that coups and chaotic politics have not reversed Russia's forward motion. The Bush and Clinton administrations' unswerving support of Yeltsin has helped, but credit is more due to the luck and the pluck of the Russian people. Whether Yeltsin's recent claims that the Russian economy has turned around may presage a transformation of wild-west capitalism is an open question. Yet with stability, Russia will reemerge as an economic and military superpower, and American and Russian leadership need to forge cooperation within manageable competition.

The worldwide move toward democracy is not inherently unidirectional. We neglect potential powers like Ukraine

when we focus too greatly on Russia and ignore future Russian leaders when we rely too heavily on Boris Yeltsin. It is important that the US and the community of nations criticize the backsliding of former communist countries like Belarus that seem reluctant to leave behind their authoritarian past and the strong-man politics of Peru which could spread again in Latin America.

When the world praises the downfall of communism, it downplays the lingering totalitarianism of eastern Asia, while fixating on the failings of a neighboring island. China remains politically dictatorial, Vietnam is only fledgling in the free market, and North Korea is inward-looking and Stalinist. Most of the former dominoes in Asia are now in the capitalist camp, although Burma resists democracy and Cambodia again faces bitter civil strife.

As for China, its swiftly expanding economy, trade and military might partially obscure Beijing's repressive politics and human rights violations. Memories of Tiananmen Square and the clumsy deployment of troops at the handover of Hong Kong reflect a recurring unease that periodically threatens China's most favored nation status. Its fidelity to the promise of "one country two systems" as Hong Kong reintegrates will provide telling evidence for the future of relations, especially with Taiwan. The US needs to contemplate how it will engage the China behemoth into the next century.

Finally, the end of the Cold War has, ironically, increased the threat of nuclear accident, proliferation and terror as loosened and under-funded controls over nuclear weapons have raised the level of insecurity. The collapse of imperial control of the Soviet arsenal has left decentralized and cash-starved authorities responsible for the maintenance of dangerous but valuable conventional and unconventional weapons of mass destruction. The developed world would do well to invest more significant sums in quickly reducing the arsenals and continue to push for nonproliferation, especially in the Indian subcontinent.

A Future Doctrine?

What might world leadership beyond crises look like if the President or his successor were to develop a doctrine to guide a new American role in the world? The very exercise of trying to envision pathfinding futures over the coming century might inspire a more engaging American way. A clear but flexible set of principles would establish a basis for consistent foreign policy that both allies and adversaries can rely upon.

Individual members of the Clinton administration have articulated possible policy directions. Former national security adviser Anthony Lake pronounced at Princeton University the need for principled engagement, enlargement and Wilsonian internationalism. The post-communist era, he said, provides the opportunity to defend the ideas of "democracy, liberty,

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civility, and pluralism.” He called for a bipartisan coalition of the center in Congress and the White House to counter the “neo-know-nothings” of isolationism. He encouraged the replacement of obsolete, Cold War containment policy by engagement abroad in the enlargement of the democratic community.

Secretary of State Madeline Albright proposes, too, an engaging form of foreign policy participation. In a recent speech at the 50th anniversary of the Marshall plan, she advocated a more assertive role for the US into the approaching millennium: it would bring together an international system based on democracy, open markets, law and peace. Her remarks recognized today as an historic moment for the US to avoid retreating from the world while prodding “every continent” toward participation in “an international system based on democratic principles.” The US, she said, possesses a larger duty as an author of history to serve as a “pathfinding” partner, not an arbiter.

The very public articulation of these ideas reveals how aware decision makers have become that the long term success of US involvement requires public support. How to incorporate the new realities of contemporary US and world politics into the process of leadership is a challenge to the nation’s current, venerable and future policy makers. Americans may be reluctant warriors at times, but we are ultimately world citizens who are open to persuasion.

Secretaries can only lead so far when an administration lacks an overall vision of America in the world. Still largely focused on contentious domestic politics, the President does not see far be-

yond American shores. He needs to devise and project a wider world view. Like Wilson, FDR, and LBJ before him, Clinton may be called to world leadership by a major crisis. Yet Bosnia showed how to enhance his presidential status when he acts in world affairs. As his recent foreign policy speeches perhaps reflect, the President could well make his much desired mark in history on both the world and domestic stages. If the US won’t raise the banner of world leadership and human rights, who will?

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America’s future role can draw from our successful contributions to recent progress that needs to be sustained. For instance, the ongoing democratization of Latin America, including our nearest neighbors in Mexico and Central America, represents one of the most remarkable transformations of the generation. The US would do well, too, by emulating the humanitarian leadership of our largest trading partner to the north.

The US and UN need to catalyze a democratic and market transformation

on the wider African continent. The nation needs to help forge and articulate rules of international law and mechanisms through multilateral organizations for dealing with failed states like Somalia and Rwanda, and rogue states like Iraq and Iran. The US, through the UN, needs to pressure Israeli and Arab partners to follow through on good faith negotiations in the Middle East. In this hemisphere, the US can strengthen ties to OAS and in Europe help to renew NATO by pressing to clarify its institutional purposes.

The US could move itself and the world in a more positive direction by publicly acknowledging that American leadership, when required, is a good investment in the nation’s and the world’s future. Jointly setting and enforcing clear standards of global conduct initially costs more than noninvolvement but ultimately provides larger benefits in a safer and freer world. Similar arguments about the long term benefits of free markets and fair trade need to be made more consistently about foreign aid and diplomatic funding. Our leaders need to articulate more clearly, too, the value of immigration and of world citizenship for US prosperity.

Whether the twenty-first century will belong to America or others depends in large part on the foundations set in this last decade of the twentieth. America’s world role is likely to continue to oscillate among concatenating events. Yet enlightened national leaders can seize the opportunity for a greater potential. America has choices for a global role today that creates opportunities as well as concerns for the wider world tomorrow.



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