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Debating Decline, Sidelining Foreign Policy

John Collins

By Gregorio Bettiza and Emiliano Alessandri.

As the US economy improves, Syria continues its descent into chaos and Iran carries on its enrichment program, foreign policy is acquiring a more prominent role in the 2012 presidential contest than initially expected. So far, the cornerstone of Republican attacks on Obama, however, is not the merits and demerits of his policies but the president's alleged lack of confidence in American exceptionalism and hesitations about continued US leadership abroad. Mitt Romney insists that whereas the president is "apologizing to foreigners", "accepting decline as destiny", and "believing in a post-American world", he will ensure that the 21st century will still be an American one. Obama has joined the debate. During his 2012 State of the Union address, the President argued: "anyone who tells you that America is in decline or that our influence has waned, doesn't know what they're talking about".



As a result, foreign policy issues appear to be virtually reduced to polarized and misleading discussions about the end or continuation of US primacy. Even recent spats over Iran and Syria – which should foster a serious and focused reflection on past policy failures and available options – are largely stuck on the question of "why isn't America leading anymore?". GOP candidates accuse Obama of being weak. Commentators in Washington wonder whether we have already entered a "post-American world" in which regions previously under America's influence are now spinning out of control.

This stale and simplistic debate is a problem: American foreign policy begs instead for serious review and adjustment. Professing confidence, or betraying uncertainty, in the continuation of American leadership is no substitute for a more articulated discussion on how American power has been employed in recent years, whether it has yielded results and why, and how it should be used in the changing world of the 21st century. It is evident, in fact, that the Obama administration and its Republican contenders have come to depend upon very different understandings of American power and the changing nature of the international system. It is these approaches and their record that should be at the center of debates.

The strength of the Obama approach seems to rest on a nuanced and somewhat disenchanted understanding of the salient features of the emerging international order. This is combined with a broad view of what made American hegemony successful and the world more stable in the past century. The administration's starting point, embodied also in its 2010 National Security Strategy, is the recognition of the deeply interdependent and progressively multipolar character of international politics, where economics, ideologies and, to some extent, military power are increasingly diffused. In such an international system, America is forced to engage other powers and build coalitions. Yet American interests can nonetheless be fostered through a number of means.

Firstly, by updating and expanding the "rule-based liberal order": the complex web of international norms, cooperation regimes, and economic and security-based international institutions built over the past century. During American ascendancy, the US-inspired liberal order made American hegemony more accepted, legitimate and predictable by setting institutional constraints and normative limits on the exertion of American power. In a multipolar world, it sustains American power by binding others into a structure whose longstanding logic and rules were laid down in Washington. Such a view may be in part credited for Obama's focus on co-opting emerging powers, from China to India and others, by: expanding the G8 to the G20; bringing ever more economies into the WTO regime; and accepting reform in the voting structures of the World Bank and IMF.

Secondly, the administration has integrated notions of hard, soft and smart power in its strategic thinking. Obama and his team have sought to maintain and use wisely America's hard economic and still unparalleled military might, while rebuilding and minimizing the chances of squandering America's international reputation and the attractiveness of its ideals. Such a multifaceted understanding of power appears at the root of a number of policies. A more humble tone when addressing friends and foes internationally; multilateral approaches to crisis management (including when security risks are at stake, such as in the case of Iran); closer interpenetration between diplomacy, defense, and development; the drawdown of large-scale military operations in the Middle East while expanding a less visible but more extensive and targeted use of drones and special forces; and a carefully calibrated strategic "pivot" towards the Asia-Pacific.

The administration appears to have struck a “middle of the road” approach between pragmatic realist and liberal internationalist views about foreign relations. A complex appreciation of the nature of power in the 21st century, in general, and that of American power, in particular, has led to a fairly successful foreign policy. Osama Bin Laden is gone, the Libyan intervention was relatively short and inexpensive, American troops are out of Iraq, and G20 talks seem to have avoided dangerous beggar-thy-neighbor policies in a time of economic crisis. In the powder keg that was the Arab spring, the administration has wisely chosen a pragmatic rather than ideological course of action.

Yet many issues in Obama’s foreign strategy remain unresolved. Afghanistan and Iraq are still festering. Above all, a strategic view of US interests and the requirements for regional stability in a post-withdrawal context are currently dangerously missing. International engagement seems a sensible alternative to blunt confrontation, but has engendered limited results with both Russia and China, and none with Iran. America has restored its image among old allies in Europe, but its reputation remains much contested in places like the Middle East. Guantanamo is still open and Israelis and Palestinians are not an inch closer to peace. The unintended consequences of a dangerous addiction to politically expedient drones have not been fully cashed out. In Pakistan, for example, these seem to be destabilizing the country even further. More broadly, while the Western-built international institutional architecture has remained in place, its effective strength is in question. What if China and other emerging powers simply do not gracefully accept multilateral constraints? What if they decide to use their newly-acquired influence to transform the system from within?

Rather than engaging in substantive debates about the unfolding shape of the world and scrutinizing the administration’s record armed with credible alternatives, Republican frontrunner Mitt Romney and other leading candidates are instead questioning Obama’s very faith in America. Diplomacy and, especially, engagement are considered elements of weakness: as suggested by Republican accusations levied at Obama of “appeasing” Russia, Iran, China, and Muslims. All international problems seem to have a viable military solution. Updating international institutions and working through multilateral forums tend to be seen as unnecessary, self-inflicted constraints. Concepts such as “soft power” are largely ignored.

The Republican candidates’ reading of the changing Middle East is almost exclusively from the perspective of Israel’s security, and defined chiefly in terms of the military and ideological balance in the region. They demonstrate little appreciation of the multifaceted and increasingly plural landscape of the Arab and Muslim worlds. The strategic pivot to Asia is dismissed as having for now little military substance. Moreover, the call for a strong America generally dovetails with a deep suspicion of other cultures. Islamists, Chinese, but also Europeans are either dangerous or weak. Apart from chest-thumping over America’s renewed leadership and the promise of a new American century, the GOP candidates’ contribution of ideas and solutions to pressing foreign policy issues is limited.

The problem is that Republicans still largely seem attached to a view of America’s power and role in the world that marks little progress from the troubling belligerent approach and controversial record of the Bush years. Scratching beneath the surface of campaign rhetoric, in fact, it is possible to detect the influence of the same conservative thinkers, thinkers that played so large a role in American policy debates after 9/11: Charles Krauthammer’s unapologetic understandings of power equating the end of America’s militarily-underpinned unipolarity to chaos; Robert Kagan’s critique of liberal institutionalism; Samuel Huntington’s civilizational geopolitics. Leading GOP candidates all appear to subscribe to a fairly basic understanding of American power, mainly in terms of military preponderance and cultural/ideological prowess. The mix did not work particularly well when America was stronger, in the first decade of this century, and nobody explains why it should work better today.

Overall, as the debate on foreign policy is picking up, it appears to be dangerously flattened out on a discussion about US leadership, rather than about strategy. Instead of confronting each other on the successes and setbacks of the Bush and Obama administrations – which have pursued rather different approaches to promoting American interests – parties are dueling over which group believes more fervently in American primacy. In the meantime, almost no one on the campaign trail is addressing what seem to be the ever more evident limits of US foreign policy as the new century progresses. A debate on American exceptionalism may score political points, but it hardly fosters increased public understanding of international issues and the hard challenges that lie ahead.

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