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Obama nation?: US foreign policy one year on: the end of leadership? - constraints on the world role of Obama's America

Report

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The End of Leadership? - Constraints on the World Role of Obama's America¹

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INTRODUCTION

It is appealing to think of the Obama administration as a return to normalcy after the deviance, unilateralist arrogance and damaging mistakes of the Bush years. In this view, we should expect a return to business as usual, with the US picking up the signature themes of multilateralism and the market that have underpinned its world role since the end of the Second World War. Although by no means universally loved, the US was an effective leader through the Cold War and beyond not only because it promoted liberal economic and political values that were attractive to many others, but also because it was prepared to bind its own power in multilateral rules and institutions sufficiently that its followers could contain their fear of its overwhelming power. Does Obama's liberal stance mean that we should expect a return to the leadership role that the US has exercised for more than half a century? I argue that this is unlikely to happen because there are now three powerful constraints that will largely block a return to US leadership. The first is that the US has lost much of its followership. The second is that the capacity of the US to lead is now much weakened even if it still retains the will to do so. The third is that there is a general turn within international society against hegemony and therefore against the global leadership role itself.

LOST FOLLOWERSHIP

If the US remains willing to lead, will anyone follow? There are two issues here: the growing range of policy disagreements on specific issues between the US and others; and the decline of shared values and visions between the US and its former followers. A good symbol of the weakening relationship between the US and its followers is the replacement of talk about 'friends and allies' or 'the free world' with a much harsher and still basically unchanged, line about 'coalitions of the willing'. There is some hope that under Obama differences over policy might improve in specific areas, particularly the environment, but even on that issue Obama will be lucky just to get the US seen as not part of the problem. Domestic constraints on carbon pricing and accepting binding international standards will make it difficult for the US to lead. Many other areas of disagreement remain, some deep. The

1 This paper is mainly extracted from Barry Buzan, 'A Leader Without Followers? The United States in World Politics After Bush', Global Policy Institute Pamphlet No. 6, Forumpress, July 2009.

US has failed to make the war on terrorism into anything like the binding cause that underpinned its leadership during the Cold War, and its policies continue to erode its liberal credentials. By its use of torture, and even moreso the public advocacy of such interrogation techniques by senior Bush administration figures, and by its rejection of the Geneva Conventions on prisoners or war, it exposed itself to ridicule and contempt as an advocate for human rights. That China is still plausibly able to criticise the US on human rights and environment issues is a marker of how far Washington's reputation has fallen. US policy in the Middle East, particularly on Israel, has few followers, and the repercussions of the disastrous interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to rattle on. Unless China turns quite nasty, the inclination of many in the US to see China as a challenger to its unipolar position is unlikely to attract much sympathy. The financial chaos of 2008-9 has undermined Washington's credibility as an economic leader.

Anti-Americanism, though obviously not new became exceptionally strong under Bush, and is now more culturally based, and more corrosive of shared identities. It questions whether the 'American way of life' is an appropriate model for the rest of the world, and whether the US economic model is either sustainable or desirable. It looks at health; at a seeming US inclination to use force as the first choice policy instrument, with its domestic parallel of gun culture; at the influence of religion and special interest lobbies in US domestic politics; at a US government which was openly comfortable with the use of torture and was re-elected; and at a federal environmental policy until recently in denial about global warming; and asks not just whether the US is a questionable model, but whether it has become a serious part of the problem. While some of this was specific to the Bush administration, and is being turned around by Obama, some of the deeper issues are more structural. The US is much more culturally conservative, religious, individualistic, and anti-state than most other parts of the West. America's religion

and cultural conservatism and anti-statism set it apart from most of Europe, where disappointment with Obama is already palpable. America's individualism and anti-statism set it apart from Asia, where China is anyway disinclined to be a follower. This kind of anti-Americanism rests on very real differences, and raises the possibility that the idea of 'the West' was just a passing epiphenomenon of the Cold War. The Bush administration asset-stripped half-a-century of respect for, goodwill towards and trust in US leadership, and it reflected, and helped to consolidate, a shift in the centre of gravity of US politics. The Obama administration cannot just go back to the late 1990s and pick up from where Clinton left off.

LOST CAPACITY

In addition to having less common ground with its followers the US also has less capacity, both material and ideological, to play the role of leader. The rise of China, and also India, Brazil and others, means that the US now operates in a world in which the distribution of power is becoming more diffuse, and in which several centres of power are not closely linked to it, and some are opposed. In this context, the Bush legacy of a crashed economy and an enormous debt severely constrain the leadership options of the Obama administration. The economic crisis of 2008-9 not only hamstrung the US in terms of material capability, but also stripped away the Washington consensus as the ideological legitimiser for US leadership. The collapse of neoliberal ideology might yet be seen as an ideational event on the same scale as the collapse of communism in 1989.

Since the late 1990s, and very sharply since 2003, the US has in many ways become the enemy of its own 20th century project and thus of its own capacity to lead. Not surprisingly this has deepened a longstanding disjuncture between how the US perceives itself and how the rest of the world sees it. The deeply established tendency of the US to see itself as an intrinsic force for good because it

stands for a right set of universal values, makes it unable easily, or possibly at all, to address the disjuncture between its self-perception and how others see it. Self-righteous unilateralism does not acquire legitimacy abroad. To the extent that celebrations of US power as a good in itself (because the US is good) dominate American domestic politics, this does not inspire the US to seek grounds for legitimating its position abroad. A contributing factor here is the US tendency to demand nearly absolute security for itself. The problem for the US of transcending its own self-image is hardly new, but it has become both more difficult and more important in managing its position in the more complex world in which the US is neither so clearly on the right side of a great struggle, nor so dominant in material terms. It is unclear at this point whether Obama will be able to transcend this aspect of American politics, though it is clear that the nature of American politics makes it difficult for any president to do so.

THE TURN AGAINST HEGEMONY

The third constraint stems not from any particular characteristic of the US, but from the fact of unipolarity itself. Since decolonisation global international society has developed a growing disjuncture between a defining principle of legitimacy based on sovereign equality, and a practice that is substantially rooted in the hegemony of great powers. The problem is the absence of a consensual principle of hegemony with which international society might bridge this gap between its principles and its practices. A concentration of power in one actor disrupts the ideas of balance and equilibrium which are the traditional sources and conditions for legitimacy in international society. This problem would arise for any unipolar power, but it connects back to the more US-specific aspects of the legitimacy deficit. Under the Bush administration, the US lost sight of what Adam Watson calls *raison de systeme* ('the belief that it pays to make the system work'), and this exacerbated the illegitimacy of hegemony in itself. Since the US looks unlikely to abandon its attachment to its own hegemony, this problem is not going to go away.

If hegemony itself is illegitimate, and the US now lacks both the capabilities and attractiveness to overcome this, what lies on the near horizon is a world with no global leader. Such a world would still have several great powers influential within and beyond their regions: the EU, Russia, China, Japan, the US, possibly India and Brazil. It would also have many substantial regional powers such as South Africa, Turkey and Iran. Whether one sees a move towards a more polycentric, pluralist, and probably regionalised, world political order as desirable or worrying is a matter of choice. In such a world, global hegemony by any one power or culture will be unacceptable. Obama may hasten or delay the US exit from leadership. But the waning of the Western tide, and the re-emergence of a more multi-centred (in terms of power and wealth) and more multicultural (albeit with substantial elements of Westernization) world, mean that hegemonic global leadership whether by a single power or the West collectively is no longer going to be acceptable. The question is whether such a new world order can find the foundations for collective great power management, and whether the US can learn to live in a more pluralist international society where it is no longer the sole superpower but merely the first among equals. ■