

US Foreign Policy: Continuity and Change in an Increasingly Complex World

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US Foreign Policy: Power and Constraints

At the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the United States of America continues to be the pre-eminent power in the world. Even the economic crisis of 2008–9, which erupted there first before spreading to the rest of the world, reaffirmed America's global influence. Whereas Japan's economic malaise had been going on for two decades, it was only when the US got sick that the whole world became infected.

For all the recent costs and failures of US foreign policy in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States remains unrivalled internationally in terms of its power. With an economy of almost \$15 trillion and a defence budget of \$600 billion in 2010 (CIA, 2010), the US is the sole military superpower. Indeed, the US spends as much on defence as does the rest of the world combined and is the only country with an ability to assert its power anywhere in the world. Unlike any other nation, the US has global interests and a worldwide network of alliances and bases for their defence. It enjoys a historically unprecedented abundance of both hard and soft power, including a widespread influence in both elite¹ and popular culture that in the eyes of many has equated globalisation with Americanisation. In sum, no major international problem, from Palestine to Korea, can be solved in opposition to or even without the active engagement of the US. In this sense, the United States truly remains the indispensable nation.²

¹ For example, it is estimated that 80% of the world's scientific research takes place in the US.

² Addressing an audience at Ohio State University in Columbus on 18 February 1998, Clinton's Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, proclaimed: 'We are

And yet, it is equally true that no major international problem, from environmental degradation and climate change to transnational mega-terrorism, can be resolved by the US without the support of and cooperation with other powers. The US is powerful but not as powerful as it is often thought to be. It can do many things on its own, but managing and successfully harnessing the forces of globalisation towards stability and prosperity requires the cooperation of Asia and Europe. This reality informs US foreign policy as it confronts the challenge of power transition (the rise of China) and power diffusion (the 'privatisation' of mass murder and war).

Briefly put, the United States is neither weak nor omnipotent. Appreciating the complexities of the various power structures that inform today's world requires an open, unbiased mind that has often proved elusive.³ Outsiders tend to view the US as a behemoth, sometimes scary and threatening, sometimes magnanimous and benevolent. On the other hand, Americans, having led and won all the major battles of the twentieth century, find it difficult to cooperate with others. Often they appear impatient, moralising and distasteful of the 'old world's' time-consuming diplomatic games. And yet a successful US foreign policy needs, first and foremost, to be able to recognise where America should take the lead and where it should cooperate and share with others in taking the wheel of a rapidly changing world.

This is a central issue but only one of the many choices and dilemmas US foreign policymaking involves. Overall, American foreign policy remains a balancing act between a number of often opposing forces: a volatile domestic public opinion versus hard international realities; short-term political gains versus long-term national interests; a populist impulse towards isolationism versus a missionary zealotry and a tendency to overreach; militarism versus the need for constructive engagement abroad in an age of increased interdependence and, ultimately, between (liberal) values and (realist) interests. Thus far, the end result of this balancing act has

the greatest country in the world. And what we are doing is serving the role of the *indispensable nation* to see what we can do to make the world safer for our children and grandchildren and for those people around the world who follow the rules'.

³ In the 1990s Joseph S. Nye popularised the notion of the variety of power and the distinct dimensions or levels of world politics: the political/military, the economic and the non-governmental/transnational (Nye 1991, 2004).

been a policy that oscillates between unilateralism and selective multi-lateralism.

The pressures and counter-pressures of contrasting policy choices have increased with the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the clear and tangible threat that the Soviet Union was between 1945 and 1989 (Huntington, 1997). For a while, after 1989, the US appeared unchallenged. But this 'unilateral moment' was not meant to last. Soon, tensions resurfaced and came to a peak with George W. Bush's adventurism in the Middle East, mainly in Iraq, and the hijacking of US foreign policy by neoconservatives along the lines of a radical, militaristic and heavily ideological agenda. The arrival of Barack Obama at the White House was greeted with worldwide relief, and there has since been some rebalancing of US foreign policy. But the tensions remain, as is evident in the failures of US policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the stagnation of the Palestinian–Israeli peace process.

Alexis de Toqueville, the pre-eminent analyst of America's public psyche, wrote some 170 years ago that the conduct of foreign policy in a democracy is a particularly difficult business.⁴ According to this great thinker, whereas foreign policy requires patient long-term planning, secrecy and cool calculation, emotion-prone public opinion often privileges short-term and spectacular gains. This is especially true for the United States, with its particularly open and adversarial political system. US foreign policy is greatly influenced by domestic developments, and much of Washington's behaviour abroad can be explained by American rather than by global politics. From the policy regarding Cuba to the policy in the Middle East and the Arab–Israeli dispute, American foreign policy often appears hostage to a lobby infested political system of special interests (Davidson, 2009).

The primary architect of US foreign policy is the president, representing the American interest as a whole. He (or she) is the commander-in-chief, aided by a cabinet that he more or less appoints and dismisses at will. Nevertheless, no US president can ignore Congress, which is solely responsible for the ratification of international treaties and has the absolute power of the

⁴ Alexis de Toqueville (2003, p. 215) wrote: 'As for myself, I have no hesitation in avowing my conviction, that it is most especially in the conduct of foreign relations, that democratic governments appear to me to be decidedly inferior to governments carried on upon different principles'.

purse. No funding for any presidential initiative, either at home or abroad, is possible without the consent of Congress (Nathan and Oliver, 1994).

However, Congress is, by nature and structure, undisciplined and fragmented. Furthermore, the Senate, the all too powerful upper chamber, does not operate according to strict majority rule, as is the case in most legislative bodies in democracies around the world, but along aristocratic principles that privilege seniority and prolonged debates. Both bestow extraordinary power on individual senators. Thus, it is often the case that a single senator from an underpopulated state of the interior, representing 1% or less of the national electorate, blocks large parts of a president's agenda simply by being the chair of a committee, or worse, by 'talking a bill out' with a so-called filibuster. Inevitably, this *modus operandi* gives a lot of power to small but well-organised minorities which, in turn, gives rise to the proliferation of lobbies and lobbying in favour of a particular cause, often to the detriment of the overall national interest.

Things have grown worse over the years due to an increase in partisanship and the practice of gerrymandering (i.e. the practice, in first-past-the-post electoral systems, of redrawing the boundaries of electoral districts to give one party an electoral majority). The old consensus that supported US foreign policy during the Cold War has gone, the American nation appears to be, politically, equally divided between Democrats and Republicans,⁵ and the ideological divide between the two parties is growing. This has been particularly true ever since the Republicans succeeded in shifting the political centre further to the right, espousing cultural politics, political evangelicalism and anti-state populism in reaction to the old, post-war liberal consensus.

Furthermore, due to the politically based redistricting of electoral constituencies, at least 80% of races for seats in the House of Representatives have become uncompetitive. At present, modern information technology can map the electoral profile of a district with an accuracy that would have been unimaginable only a few years ago. The result of these races is a foregone conclusion in favour of the Democrat or the Republican candidate. Therefore, the real contest has become the inner-party primaries for the selection of the party candidate. In primaries, only a few of the party

⁵ In the presidential elections of 2008, Barack Obama won with 53% of the vote; in 2004, George W. Bush with 51% and in 2000, with 48% (less than his rival); in 1996, Bill Clinton won with 49% and in 1992, with 43% of the vote.

faithful are motivated enough to vote, which means that the more extreme and partisan a candidate is, the better he or she does. Consequently, the real outcome of gerrymandering is a polarised and overtly partisan House, with Congressmen representing narrow, extreme and irreconcilable positions that cannot easily converge to form a coherent policy.

There is simply no way one can overestimate the fragmentation, divisions and infighting that US foreign policymaking involves (Scott, 1998). Nevertheless, most foreigners continue to hold a very simplistic view of America, being unable and unwilling to appreciate the competition between the executive and the legislature, among the various branches of the US state bureaucracy (the Departments of State, Defense and Homeland Security, the intelligence community and so on) and within the legislature itself. And then, there also exists a lively civil society comprised, among other things, of influential old and new media, well-endowed think tanks and venerable universities.

US Foreign Policy: The New Challenges

Returning to the international level, three challenges stand out for US foreign policy and require priority attention: making sure that China's rise does not disturb world peace, fighting radical Islamism in parallel with fulfilling a minimum of Palestinian national aspirations and managing globalisation through the enhancement of international cooperation while protecting human rights more effectively and consistently worldwide.

The single development that characterises the beginning of the twenty-first century is the rise of Asia, mainly China and secondarily, India. In the past, capitalism succeeded several times in uplifting millions of people out of poverty. But never before have so many people in such a brief period of time enriched themselves enough to attain a middle class lifestyle, as has been the case with China since 1978.

Economic success holds the promise of greater political influence in world affairs. China is already the second largest economy in the world and, if current trends hold, will be the largest by 2030 (Barboza, 2010). This will undoubtedly mark a great shift – or, to be more precise, a return to the pre-1800 world, when China and India possessed half of the world's wealth. In any case, this is a development with important geostrategic consequences.

The question that dominates current US foreign policy thinking is how to manage China's rise. Should the United States contain or engage China? The answer, of course, depends on whether China constitutes a threat or an opportunity. No matter how one decides to answer, China is probably both an opportunity and a potential threat.

But first, it should be remembered that in the past, there have been many challenges to US pre-eminence that never really succeeded in toppling America from first place. In the 1950s it was the Soviet Union, but by 1991 the Soviet state had collapsed. In the 1970s it was Japan, but since 1990 that country has been suffering from a stagnation that shows no sign of ending anytime soon.

Currently, China is growing rapidly but nothing guarantees that this will continue unabated in the future. Already, some envision a certain 'Japanese syndrome' afflicting China after 2020 (Devine, 2010). In sum, China is more vulnerable than it seems today. Rising wealth will inevitably increase the popular pressure for a political opening that might curtail the Communist Party's hold on power and reinforce the decentralising forces in the country. Western China, from Tibet to Xinjiang, seems decades behind the booming eastern coast and continues to be plagued by serious ethnic strife. China cannot benefit in perpetuity from technology transfers from abroad, a frantic export-based growth, an undervalued currency, an appalling disregard for the environment and its own people, and a demographic window that is rapidly closing, as the benefits of the one-child policy were short term while the costs are felt only in the long run. The Chinese population is ageing rapidly and in the foreseeable future, the average Chinese under the best possible scenario will continue to be much poorer than the average American no matter what.

History, from the Athenian democracy of the fifth century BC to the German Reich in the first half of the twentieth century, teaches us many lessons, none better than the dangers involved in the rise of a new power. The world might be faced with a similar situation when the Chinese leadership feels confident enough to translate Chinese wealth into political power. Certainly the effects will be felt first and foremost in Asia, but China is already flexing its muscles in far away places such as Latin America and Africa.⁶

⁶ There has been much talk, for example, about China's support for the Sudanese government, which has been accused of genocide in Darfur; see Harman (2007).

The United States has responded by boosting a network of alliances around China's perimeter, including with India (Bajoria and Pan, 2010), which the US had antagonised throughout much of its independent existence.⁷ In this regard, Russia and Japan are of critical importance. The common fear of Beijing might lead to a rapprochement between Washington and Moscow or the nuclearisation of Japanese defence in the future.

All these factors may result in China's becoming less of a hegemon and less than the threat many outsiders fear. Nevertheless, peace or conflict will ultimately depend on political choices and the wisdom of leaders on all sides in steering the world against the tides of rapid economic and technological change and towards stability.

If China poses a conventional problem of power transition among states and the peaceful management of the global balance of power, the other two main challenges facing US foreign policy – radical Islamism and adapting the international institutional architecture to the challenges of globalisation and democratisation – are unconventional. They are related to the diffusion of power away from the state and into a disorderly, often chaotic transnational society.

In a sense, these challenges are about the weakening of the state as the traditional focus of the post-Westphalian international system, and the risks and opportunities associated with this process. This diffusion of power involves a variety of phenomena, including mega-terrorism, potentially, with weapons of mass destruction, the proliferation of failed states that feed criminality and regional instability and the expansion of transnational organised crime (Glenny, 2009), but, on the positive side, the emancipation of people from traditional authority and the renewed popular pressure for the respect of human rights, to the detriment of state rights (mainly, the state's right of sovereignty and of the non-interference in its internal affairs by other states). Facing up to these risks and opportunities requires new thinking and new strategies.

Today, US foreign policy needs, more than ever before, to move in all sorts of directions and use all sorts of different tools.⁸ Rivalry among states

⁷ *The Economist* (2010a) recently claimed that India will soon outpace China.

⁸ According to Hillary Clinton (2009): 'We must use what has been called smart power – the full range of tools at our disposal – diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural – picking the right tool, or combination of tools, for each situation. With smart power, diplomacy will be the vanguard of foreign policy'.

is not ‘the only game in town’. Grasping this new reality requires a titanic mental shift for a machinery that was accustomed to working within the simplicity of the Cold War world and for a domestic political system that has favoured a few, striking ‘truths’.

In recent years, Islamism has emerged as the new global threat in place of Communism and the Soviet Union. The very term remains ill defined, adding to the overall confusion. For example, some conservative (and neo-conservative) commentators in the United States have been talking of Islamofascism,⁹ invoking powerful memories of the Second World War in an attempt to mobilise American resources towards a robust response against Iran’s nuclear programme or the possible re-Talibanisation of Afghanistan.¹⁰ For many people in the West, including Europeans, the basis of Islamism is Islam itself, a supposedly intolerant, belligerent, misogynous, all-encompassing religion that loathes the West’s core liberal ideology.

Nevertheless, the use of the term Islamism should be limited to describing contemporary political movements in the Muslim world that make systematic references to Islam and its teachings. In that regard, Islamism has politically benefited enormously from the discrediting, in the eyes of many Muslims, of the West’s secular ideologies, and from the recent bankruptcy of Marxism. Islamism’s origins are not in sixth century Arabia but in the very real problems of today that have mostly to do with issues of social control and emancipation in a world that changes at an accelerating pace, often with dramatic consequences.

⁹ According to Christopher Hitchens (2007), ‘The most obvious points of comparison would be these: Both movements are based on a cult of murderous violence that exalts death and destruction and despises the life of the mind. (“Death to the intellect! Long live death!” as Gen. Francisco Franco’s sidekick Gonzalo Queipo de Llano so pithily phrased it.) Both are hostile to modernity (except when it comes to the pursuit of weapons), and both are bitterly nostalgic for past empires and lost glories. Both are obsessed with real and imagined “humiliations” and thirsty for revenge. Both are chronically infected with the toxin of anti-Jewish paranoia (interestingly, also, with its milder cousin, anti-Freemason paranoia). Both are inclined to leader worship and to the exclusive stress on the power of one great book. Both have a strong commitment to sexual repression – especially to the repression of any sexual ‘deviance’ – and to its counterparts the subordination of the female and contempt for the feminine. Both despise art and literature as symptoms of degeneracy and decadence; both burn books and destroy museums and treasures’.

¹⁰ In Europe, the fear is of Muslim immigrants and further Muslim immigration.

The US should aim to be sensitive and intelligent when dealing with such a complex, multifaceted and extremely varied phenomenon that has been generated by modernity and modernisation in some parts of the Muslim world and avoid repeating the mistaken excesses of the Cold War struggle against Soviet Communism. Not all Islamists are the same and most are non-violent. Al-Qaeda, a small, radical offspring, is not the Soviet Union of today nor can it be defeated in the same way. Military deterrence and coercion cannot be the only tool in the toolbox of foreign and security policy. Besides military force, al-Qaeda's defeat requires networks of intelligence and alliances around the world and a strategy that integrates killing with 'winning the hearts and minds' of the world's dispossessed.

In this regard, many Islamists might pose a threat to the established political order of their country but not necessarily to the West. Take the case of Turkey: much has been said and written about Turkey's estrangement with the West (Cagaptay, 2009), with the US, Europe and Israel, especially since the mildly Islamist Tayip Erdogan was triumphantly re-elected in 2007 (*The Economist*, 2010b). However, Turkey's new-found confidence in foreign affairs is not necessarily the result of an Islamist government's reorientation away from the West and towards the East; it might be the product of Turkey's success and rapid economic growth. In the past there were similar instances when Turkey attempted a similar flexing of its muscles, and it should not be unexpected that today's Turkey repeats itself.

Radical Islamism, and in particular violent radical Islamism, is a minority phenomenon in the Muslim world. While its danger should not be underestimated, neither should it be exaggerated. More important, it should be understood rather than simply demonised. Thus, it should be properly contextualised in time and space. The stimulation of fear might be a profitable electoral strategy for entrepreneurial politicians in the short term but can prove dangerous and counterproductive as a basis for a foreign policy strategy.

Along these lines of thinking, it should not be forgotten that nothing has poisoned the US relationship with the Muslim world's Arab heartland more than the unresolved Palestinian problem, a classic question of national self-determination inherited from colonial times. Palestine has become the rallying cry for all anti-Americans around the world. The seemingly unconditional support of the US for Israel, even with the proliferation of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, is highly problematic not only because it directly foments instability on the ground but also because

it makes a mockery of America's liberal ideals and commitment to human rights.

It is often said that we live in the age of globalisation. It is true that the flow of goods, services, capital, people and ideas across state borders has increased exponentially during the past few decades, and in many respects the world today is more interdependent and integrated than at any moment in human history. And yet, the world remains politically divided among egotistic and self-serving states. This is the real tragic paradox our world is faced with: thanks largely to globalisation, all major international problems today require for their solution the enhancement of international co-operation, but the present structures of the international system cannot provide for that.

Take, for example, the problems generated by human activity, such as environmental degradation, climate change, infectious diseases, deadly epidemics, economic crises and global financial imbalances. All these 'new' and unconventional risks and threats to international security cannot be dealt with by one nation alone, no matter how powerful it is or feels itself to be. Dealing with these problems effectively requires a completely different foreign policy posture from the one the United States exhibited after 9/11.

Until recently, the US had mostly remained sceptical of international cooperation or, more precisely, was willing to cooperate as long as it was in the lead. Being the most powerful nation on earth, the US has been justifiably reluctant to constrain its freedom of action by the niceties of international law and international organisations.¹¹ For years, Washington seemed to believe that international cooperation was a luxury the US could ill afford. However, the challenge of managing globalisation effectively has turned this old belief on its head. From the environment to the economy, global terrorism and pandemics, the US can no longer afford to ignore international cooperation.

The same goes for human rights. Although many Americans, including some American leaders, have been sincere in their commitment to human rights, much of the official US foreign policy has viewed human rights as a useful tool against opponents rather than an absolute value in itself. Thus violations of human rights by opponents were readily condemned but those of friends were easily ignored. Sadly, but not surprisingly, the historical

¹¹ A good example of this attitude has been the US opposition to the International Criminal Court.

record reveals that the US concern for human rights worldwide has been applied selectively and politically, in the service of other wider interests. Although far from being the only country to approach human rights that way, the United States' special weight in the international system has magnified the consequences of this inconsistency.

This is something that cannot go on forever without damaging the credibility of any policy. It is high time for some standardisation and institutionalisation. Today, it is generally accepted that state rights no longer reign supreme and that, in certain cases, state sovereignty needs to submit to human rights when the latter are grossly and massively violated. When, under what conditions and by whom can and should humanitarian interventions take place has not yet been fully determined but should, at some point, become clear.

Ultimately, if the US were willing to be more cooperative internationally, there would be no better starting point than the transatlantic relationship. After all, it was this relationship that defeated the ugly totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, and it is in this area that international and supranational cooperation has already moved the furthest.

The US–Europe Relationship: From Patronage to Partnership or Rivalry?

Since 1943,¹² the US has been rightly considered the supreme European power. Post-war European politics from reconstruction, democratisation and European integration to the end of Communism, German unification and the post-Yugoslav order have, to a great extent, been shaped by the US. Today, the transatlantic bond remains the strongest anchor for international stability and security.

Besides their cultural affinity, Europe and the US jointly control almost half of the global economic output while the size of trade and investment between the two sides of the northern Atlantic remains among the largest in the world.¹³ Furthermore, Europe and the US are united militarily

¹² In July 1943, US troops landed in Sicily as a first step in the Allies' Italian campaign during the Second World War.

¹³ According to the European Commission, the annual total trade in goods and services between the EU and the US has reached \$800 billion, the total flow of foreign direct investment (FDI) across both sides reached \$250 billion dollars

through NATO. The alliance, founded in 1949, represents a unique case of a concrete US military commitment to a multilateral organisation of collective defence. Today, through NATO, Europe and the US are jointly fighting a war in Afghanistan.¹⁴

The road to Euro–American partnership has been long and occasionally bumpy. Europeans continue to complain that Americans always want the final say and to have it either ‘their way or no way’. For their part, Americans continue to emphasise the need for a more equitable ‘burden sharing’, especially since so many Europeans enjoy a high standard of living. And yet, it is only fair to acknowledge that this partnership, forged during the Second World War and coming to full life during the first stages of the Cold War, has been an extraordinary accomplishment. Making partners out of former clients is a tribute to the extraordinary success of Europe’s reconstruction and to the US’s wise international engagement after the war.¹⁵

And yet today, the traditional European partners of the US have been turning somewhat cold vis-à-vis Washington. Up to a point this was to be expected, given Europe’s inevitable emancipation from America’s tutelage. But as long as the Soviet threat remained credible, disagreements between Europeans and Americans were kept manageable. For a brief period after the end of the Cold War, there was a political convergence between the two sides of the Atlantic with Bill Clinton occupying the White House and a group of centre-left pragmatists and reformers controlling the chancelleries of Europe.¹⁶

All this changed when George W. Bush, who came to power in 2001 and witnessed the worst atrocity committed against US citizens in recent memory on 11 September of that year, decided in 2003 to attack Iraq. Most Europeans, including the British people, reacted strongly against US foreign policy and what they thought of as dangerous American jingoism.

Since then, wounds have somehow healed and there is a general appreciation, from all sides, of the importance of the transatlantic relationship. However, it is well understood that the US and Europe, for reasons that

in 2008. See <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/creating-opportunities/bilateral-relations/countries/united-states/>, accessed 29 March 2011.

¹⁴ In March 2011 NATO undertook the enforcement of resolution 1973 of the UN Security Council in Libya.

¹⁵ For this story there is no better book than Tony Judt’s *Postwar* (2006).

¹⁶ These included Gerhard Schröder in Germany, Lionel Jospin in France, Tony Blair in Britain and Romano Prodi in Italy.

have to do with their societies' distinct historical trajectories, are different and look at the world differently.¹⁷ When it comes to international politics, force still matters a great deal for America, whereas for Europe, the use of force is considered illegitimate and, increasingly, even unimaginable, no matter what the circumstances.¹⁸

Even more worrisome is that Europe, in many American eyes, seems to grow irrelevant. There are two reasons for this. First, Europe, in relative terms, has been stagnating economically, while its population is ageing and, in some parts, even shrinking, at an alarming rate.¹⁹ Second, Europe remains introverted and self-absorbed, consumed by the struggle to save whatever parts of the old welfare state it can, while spending all its remaining energy on integrating the newcomers of Eastern Europe.

It should be understood that US talk about European decline is the mirror image of Europe's talk about US adventurism. According to this discourse, whereas the United States is young, energetic and occasionally foolish, Europe is perceived as old, passive, cynical and inactive. Each side suffers from its own age-related disadvantages: America from the perils of adolescence and Europe from those of old age.

While both beliefs hold some truth, they are grossly exaggerated. For example, while Europe is facing the challenge of economic and demographic renewal, it is still the biggest economic area in the world with a credible common currency, the euro. Its core country, Germany, is the world's biggest exporter and is currently growing faster than any other rich country.²⁰ Similarly, the US administration's bold action during the eco-

¹⁷ The recent US midterm election results are very informative in this regard. Whereas Europeans have been demonstrating against budget cuts and for more public spending, in the US the popular 'Tea Party' movement came to the fore with demands to drastically cut non-military public spending.

¹⁸ Robert Kagan, a leading neoconservative critic of Europe, summed up the argument in his celebrated book *Of Paradise and Power* (2004). This is, obviously, the case more in pacifist Germany than in the former imperial powers of Great Britain and France, as the recent intervention in Libya powerfully demonstrated.

¹⁹ Today, the EU's population, roughly speaking, totals 500 million people and that of the United States, 300 million. It is estimated that before 2050, the US population will be larger than that of the 27 countries currently in the EU.

²⁰ According to *The Economist* (2010c), 'No big developed country has come out of the global recession looking stronger than Germany has. The economy minister, Rainer Brüderle, boasts of an "XL upswing". Exports are booming and unemployment is expected to fall to levels last seen in the early 1990s'.

conomic crisis in the winter of 2008–9 saved the world from the very real risk of a global financial meltdown and might prove to have been more prudent than adventurist when compared to Europe’s slow, reluctant and cautious response.

Nevertheless, the combination of a certain European inability and unwillingness to act forcefully internationally and beyond its immediate neighbourhood, together with European disunity, is real and has contributed to the partial diminishing of Europe’s standing in the world.²¹ Moreover, since the end of the Cold War, US and world attention has turned away from Central Europe to other hotspots, especially in the Middle East and East Asia. These are the main ‘battlegrounds’ of today where the new world order, for better or worse, is being shaped. As long as Europe abstains, for whatever reason, from playing an influential role in developments there, it will remain of little relevance to US foreign policy.

US Foreign Policy: What Next?

There is no point in restating the power advantages the US enjoys and the reasons why these will last into the foreseeable future. Suffice it to say that the American electorate, even in the midst of the current serious economic crisis when available resources are shrinking, continues to support a strong army in the service of a robust foreign policy in a way that would be unthinkable for European voters. The Republicans, who reclaimed the House of Representatives in a landslide victory in the 2010 midterm elections, are eager to cut any public spending except for that on defence. This means that the US will continue to have an activist foreign policy, even without the hard edge of the Bush era.

Much of its substance and style will continue to be determined in Washington rather than in response to the realities abroad.²² But even a nation as powerful as the US cannot ignore these international realities without pay-

²¹ In this respect, it is instructive to be reminded of the Copenhagen Climate Conference of 2009: whereas the environment is supposed to be an area where Europe is in the lead, it was Barack Obama and the Chinese who set the agenda in Copenhagen.

²² It has been claimed that Obama’s support for the US military campaign in Afghanistan had to do with the need to denounce the Iraqi operation without appearing too much of a pacifist.

ing an increasingly heavy price. Thus, US foreign policy will continue to be plagued by the constraints described in the first part of this chapter. Occasionally, it will commit grave mistakes to the detriment of its own national interest and that of the world's, as was the case with Iraq. But the ability to self-correct will always be there, thanks to the country's democratic traditions and strong checks and balances.

Some will continue to dream of an American imperial hegemony; others of an American withdrawal from the world. Neither is likely to happen. The age of empires is over and America has neither the will nor the ability to become one. At the same time, the US, thanks to its vast endogenous resources that have mostly to do with the wealth of its human capital and the robustness of its domestic institutions, is not likely to suffer a decline similar to the one experienced by Britain, the last empire that ruled much of the world. This is not necessarily a bad thing. The world would not be a safer place without the US, no matter what anti-Americans claim. Nor is the American national interest better served without a US foreign policy of actively engaging in an ever more closely interdependent world.

Thus for the foreseeable future, America will continue to be the world's leader but one increasingly in need of cooperating closely with others. Both Americans and foreigners will remain suspicious of each other. America will not become an empire, but it will be more than a country. It is and will be the great canvas upon which humanity projects its fears, frustrations, envy and hopes, often all at the same time. For all its occasional missteps, the United States will remain the world's strongest pillar for a secure, prosperous and liberal future.

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<http://www.springer.com/978-3-642-21954-2>

International Politics in Times of Change

Tzifakis, N. (Ed.)

2012, XXV, 334 p. 3 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-642-21954-2