Part II

The Great Powers
The United States
The contemporary world’s indispensable nation?

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On 20 January 1997, America’s forty-second President, William Jefferson Clinton, used his second inaugural address to proclaim that ‘America stands alone as the world’s indispensable nation’. Calling attention to United States centrality to the post-Cold War order, Clinton’s assertion also hinted at the recognition of the evolving nature of power and influence in the emerging international environment. With the bipolarity of the Cold War giving way to a more complex distribution of power in which traditional forms and levers of power are complicated by the complexities of an increasingly globalised and interconnected world, the United States (and all major Powers) face new challenges and constraints. For the United States, the shift to greater multipolarity and the relative rise of major Powers like China, Japan, Britain, France, Germany, Russia, India, Brazil, and perhaps others, complicate the status of the United States as the sole global Power able to extend its reach around the world. Moreover, the increasingly important role of non-state and transnational actors in international politics muddies traditional conceptions of national power and national interests. All of these combine to establish a complex international environment in which major Powers, middle Powers, developing Powers, and non-state and transnational actors interact. As Clinton’s assertion suggests, the United States may occupy a central and privileged place in this order, but ‘indispensability’ is a far cry from ‘dominance’.

Many Americans have the perception that American foreign policy was isolationist until the Second World War and internationalist thereafter. However, if one defines isolationism to mean non-involvement, clearly the United States has never been isolationist:

Only by the loosest conceivable definition of the term, however, could ‘isolation’ be said to represent the reality of United States policy during the first century-and-a-half of American independence. A nation that by 1900 had quadrupled its land mass at the expense of other claimants, engaged in multiple wars of conquest, vigorously pursued access to markets in every quarter of the globe, and acquired by force an overseas empire could hardly be said to have been ‘isolated’ in any meaningful sense.

If ‘isolationism’ and ‘internationalism’ are poor guides to American engagement with the world, how can the historical context be better understood?
In fact, since achieving its independence, American engagement with the rest of the world has passed through three major periods. The first was the Continental Era (1776–1860s), in which the United States focused on building an independent country safe from its neighbors, expanding territorial control over North America, constructing a strong national economy, and establishing a stable democratic polity. After the American Civil War, a Regional Era (1860s–1940s) ensued, in which American foreign policy was increasingly motivated by a growing sense of a ‘manifest destiny’ that emphasised ‘the special virtues of the American people and their institutions; their mission to redeem and remake the world in the image of America; and the American destiny under God to accomplish this sublime task’. During this period, American foreign policy was geared toward promoting and maintaining political stability, whilst seeking economic expansion abroad, often engaging in military intervention and occupation, especially in Latin America and Asia. Toward the end of this period, the United States became increasingly involved in Europe as well, first entering the First World War and then, after isolationist sentiment amongst the American public and a strong peace movement contributed to Washington’s rejection of American participation in the League of Nations, through other forms of active involvement. Nevertheless, whilst becoming increasingly important to the international political economy, the United States continued promotion of trade protectionism and was unwilling to take a strong leadership position with a declining Britain, which contributed to the world falling into the Great Depression.

The Second World War catapulted the United States into a Global Era (1940s–present). In the aftermath of the war, American leaders built on the foundation of international engagement established by Franklin Roosevelt in the war to assume a position of global leadership. From the Truman Administration to the Vietnam War, American leaders generally agreed on a global strategy that involved two related strands: a ‘containment order’ and a ‘liberal economic order’. In essence, American strategy included the pursuit of global security and stability during the Cold War and in the face of the perceived Soviet expansionism, and the promotion of a liberal international market economy based upon the principles of free, open trade, fixed exchange rates, and multilateral management. With strong bipartisan support, Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower created a global American military presence, an unmatched nuclear arsenal, and an intelligence service that frequently engaged in covert operations overseas, some of which included forceful regime change in such countries as Guatemala and Iran. In the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy expanded American foreign assistance whilst maintaining an aggressive anti-communist security policy.

However, the Vietnam War shattered this Cold War consensus and severely damaged both the Johnson and Nixon administrations. The backlash against Vietnam prompted persistent struggles over the ends and means of American foreign policy for two decades. In contrast to the Cold War years, it became difficult after Vietnam for any President or administration to devise a foreign policy that responded successfully to changes in the global environment and obtain substantial domestic support. Neither Jimmy Carter’s attempt to make human rights the ‘soul of American foreign policy’ nor Ronald Reagan’s efforts to re-establish more confrontational Cold War policies reconstructed consensus. As these struggles persisted, the Cold War came to an end and the new international order emerged.

The preceding overview indicates the trajectory of power, influence, and engagement of the United States in world politics since its conception as an independent state. Its general outline suggests some of the underlying tensions that have characterised the American approach to the world. Understanding the trajectory, and the variation and debates underlying it, requires attention to the societal and institutional contexts that have shaped the American response to the constraints, imperatives, and opportunities of world politics over time.
The societal context of American foreign policy influences ‘the manner in which members of society, including the state elite, define themselves and their place in the larger global setting’. Whilst the societal context does not determine foreign policy, its nature gives shape to possible actions and helps shape the perceptual maps of policy-makers. As one authority suggests, the notion of ‘interests’ is deeply embedded in the societal context and political culture. The heart of the societal context consists of a set of core values, a ‘creed’, through which Americans define themselves and their engagement with the world.

First amongst these values is ‘democratic liberalism’. The United States is liberal in that it emphasises the individual and the rights and freedoms to which he or she is entitled, with a particular commitment ‘to individual liberty and the protection of private property; to limited government, the rule of law, natural rights, the perfectibility of human institutions, and the possibility of human progress’. The United States is democratic in the sense of a commitment to three things: the principle that there are specific procedures to follow for filling government positions (i.e., elections) and making government decisions; popular sovereignty, or the view that the citizens are the source of government authority and, thus, the government must be accountable to them; and majority rule with respect and protection for the rights of minorities. Democratic liberalism therefore calls for limited and accountable government that should be responsive to and formed with the participation of the citizenry.

Other elements of the societal context concern relations amongst individuals and groups in society, and between them and the government. For example, the United States tends toward ‘egalitarianism’, in that there is broad agreement that citizens ought to have equal political standing and generally equal opportunities in society. Whilst much of American history has involved a struggle to define and apply these principles of equality (especially as regards racial, ethnic, and gender differences) in the main, the commitment is real and has militated against various forms of social and class distinctions, preferences, and discrimination that have been more common elsewhere. In addition, the United States is ‘pluralist’, accepting decisions that result in the victory of one group over another as long as individuals are free to associate with groups of their choice and there are no systematic barriers blocking the right of any group or individual to advocate for their preferences. Moreover, the United States tends to be ‘legalist’, a ‘law-oriented society’ with a preference for law-making to resolve conflict and a broad belief that ‘ideas embodied in legal precepts are entitled to respect and obedience’. Finally, a general ‘universalism/exceptionalism’ underlies these preceding features, a sense that ‘the American way’ is a model for others. Americans widely believe that values discussed above are and should be embraced by others. Hence, universalism essentially leads Americans to believe that commitments to democratic liberalism, constitutional government, and the like are superior preferences suitable and desirable for all people and countries.

One way to simplify the complex connection between these aspects of culture and foreign affairs is to identify the ‘societal impulses’ and ‘foreign policy orientations’ the culture generates. These may be considered in terms of two continua. The societal impulse continuum ranges between moralism/idealism at one end to pragmatism/realism at the other. Invoking the ‘forceful assertion of society’s ideological principles’, moralism/idealism describes the impulse to promote certain values in foreign policy, rather than to defend various interests. Moralists/idealists argue that the United States should involve itself internationally for ethical reasons and in defense of moral principles. Furthermore, moralism/idealism rests on the presumption of the benevolence and moral superiority of American purposes and values and, thus, involves a sense of duty and destiny best defined as the ‘United States’ mission’.

On the other hand, pragmatism/realism involves ad hoc problem-solving that eschews broad moral, ideological, or doctrinal purposes in favour of a concern with concrete interests and a
results-based standard of evaluation. Values such as democracy and pluralism lend themselves to the development of mutually acceptable compromises as solutions to problems. Within the broad parameters of American values, the impulse toward pragmatism means ‘case-by-case-ism’, reactive rather than proactive approaches, and the focus on the short term rather than the long term.

A foreign policy orientation continuum (based on broad attitudes toward US policy) ranges between isolationism and internationalism. Isolationism may be simply defined as the desire to keep the United States out of substantial political and military involvement with the world. It is, in short, a preference for a passive response to the world whereby the United States serves chiefly as an example, without assuming responsibilities, acting as an agent to reform the world, or intervening in the affairs of others. It is in this sense that John Winthrop’s frequently repeated ‘city upon a hill’ metaphor is apt. In contrast, internationalism suggests that the United States should be actively involved in the world’s political affairs to protect American interests and provide the necessary leadership. In this view, the United States has interests and responsibilities that must be served through participation and leadership. In practice, internationalism includes the willingness to exercise power, to intervene politically, militarily, and economically in global politics, to exercise leadership in world affairs, and even to transplant American values and institutions.

These apparently opposite orientations spring from the same political culture. Not only do both orientations exist simultaneously, helping to generate a fundamental ambivalence amongst Americans toward world affairs, but the orientations themselves are bound together by a common element: the sense of an American mission to lead the world into better forms of political, social, and economic relationships. In effect, the orientations divide over the means to achieve the mission. Both depend on a unique sense of American duty and destiny.

If the societal context shapes the mode of international interactions and the definition of interests, the institutional context constitutes the players, structures, and processes that shape the particular policy strategies and decisions guiding American involvement in the world. This context begins in the United States Constitution. Without delving too deeply into the constitutional distribution of powers and responsibilities over various aspects of foreign affairs, several points should be noted. The Constitution provides for accountability and access on the part of the public, making American foreign policy the legitimate target of public pressure, and causing its makers to be rightfully concerned with public acceptance. Institutionally, the Constitution establishes the principles of separation of powers and checks and balances by which policymaking power is divided, distributed, and balanced amongst three branches of government. Furthermore, the Constitution does not assign to any branch ‘the foreign policy power’. Instead, it breaks this power into pieces and assigns various portions to the Congress and the Executive, generally forcing a sharing of responsibility. Yet, the Constitution does not specify which branch is to lead in foreign policy, providing an ‘invitation to struggle’ to the political branches.

In spite of the Constitution’s ambiguity, it is common practice to refer to ‘the pre-eminence of Presidents’ over American foreign policy. In fact, the predominant model of American foreign policy-making is a series of concentric circles beginning with the President and expanding outward to include advisors, bureaucracies, Congress, and the public. According to this model, the influence and relevance of actors decreases with the distance from the centre of the circles. To the extent that this model suggests that the White House is central to the foreign policy process, it is generally useful. However, it is often taken to mean the White House is always the center of policy-making, which is less accurate. As a former member of the National Security Council staff notes, policy-making begins ‘before the decision memorandum reached the President’s desk and continues after it has gone into the out-box’. In addition to the White House, it is possible for the bureaucracy or Congress to be at the center of policy-making or, at least, to exercise significant
influence. Moreover, actors from the public sector, including public opinion, interest groups, and the media may also play an important role. Thus, a more accurate image of the institutional context of American foreign policy is a series of shifting constellations formed by the White House (the President and key advisers), the foreign policy bureaucracy, and Congress, which are embedded in and affected by a societal circle of non-governmental actors. Foreign policy may emerge from shifting and uncertain interactions between the White House, Congress, bureaucratic agencies, and private sector groups and individuals. To be sure, the White House may dominate, but it does not necessarily always dominate.\textsuperscript{15}

Understanding this complex institutional context is central to explaining how American foreign policy-makers formulate policy and address and adapt to the challenges of the international environment. It indicates that American strategies and responses to the world are structured by its foreign policy culture, and by the structures and processes of its institutional setting. Foreign policy emerges from a political process involving the interaction of the White House, the foreign policy bureaucracy, and Congress. The role of the President and top aides and advisers stems from the President’s position as the chief executive. This circle commands the executive branch and, hence, has access to its expertise, information, and capabilities for implementing policy. Moreover, the ability of this group to set the agenda and seize the initiative, mobilise opinion, set the bureaucracy in motion, exert pressure on Congress, and force it to react, in addition to such powers as are bestowed on the commander-in-chief, chief executive, chief diplomat, and chief legislator of the United States government, provide persistent opportunities to lead policy-making.

The bureaucracy (or that part with foreign policy responsibility) is also significant in making American foreign policy. This circle consists of the State Department, Defence Department, Central Intelligence Agency, and economic agencies created to provide advice and implement policy decisions. The bureaucracy’s expertise and control of information give it a position in policy formulation by performing much of the generation and consideration of policy alternatives. Moreover, the various agencies of the foreign policy bureaucracy shape policy by their primary role in its implementation. In both of these roles, disagreements amongst different officials and agencies affect both the nature of the policy and the process by which it is formulated and implemented. Its policy behaviour is affected by its fragmentation, disagreement, ‘turf wars’, and organisational characteristics such as parochialism, risk avoidance, and routinisation.

The congressional circle influencing foreign policy includes the leadership, committees, caucuses, and individual members and staffs of both houses of Congress. Whilst limited by many structural characteristics and electoral constraints, including its size, decentralised nature, limited access to information, and procedures, the institution and its individual members have access to potentially potent avenues of influence: the ability to pass laws; the constitutional and statutory authority to hold oversight hearings; requiring reports and requesting individual briefings; the advise and consent authority over treaties and appointments; and the ‘power of the purse’. In addition, less direct and less formal instruments such as threatening to legislate, expressing a ‘mood’, issuing requests and warnings directly to executive branch personnel, or passing non-binding resolutions also provide a means for congressional influence.

The role and influence of each of these potentially important players varies within a policy, across different policies, and over different policy or historical settings. Thus, the ‘constellations’ change: leadership and influence amongst the three groups can shift and societal actors may affect a given policy. Amongst the factors that may account for these shifts are policy types (for example, crisis, strategic, or structural) timing, policy stage, or policy cycle; issue area; situation (crisis or non-crisis); and policy instrument (for instance, aid, troop deployment, diplomacy). Hence, the particular approach to the world embraced by the United States at any given time is in part a function of political variables at the societal and institutional levels.
The preceding overview provides the historical, societal, and institutional circumstances for understanding American foreign-policy strategies for engaging with the world. These forces are shaped by and influence the global context in which foreign policy takes place. The global context affects the underlying conditions or parameters of United States foreign policy, and particular world events and relationships often have an immediate impact. For example, the general patterns that prevail throughout the globe affect American power and the United States role, whilst international crises such as the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington can catapult an issue onto the political agenda and have an impact on both politics and policies.

The global context in which the United States found itself shaped its strategies and engagement with the world from its inception. After 1945, bipolarity, American power, and the rise of the Cold War led to assertive engagement in the world. United States diplomacy and statecraft were dominated by a view of the Soviet Union as an evil enemy attempting to achieve world domination. Consequently, Washington intervened throughout the world to contain Soviet communist aggression and counter threats to the status quo arising from political instability and insurgency. The United States also became the bulwark of the Bretton Woods international political economy, promoting what has been called 'nation building' in Third World countries in accord with the American liberal model of political and economic development.

Combined with the relative decline of American power, the growth of interdependence, the rise of new economic challengers in Europe and Asia, and the powerful forces of nationalism in the developing world made it increasingly difficult for the United States to pursue its Cold War policies abroad, something best illustrated by the American failure in the Vietnam War and the ending of the Bretton Woods economic system. As the world became noticeably more pluralistic and interdependent, the United States ability to influence the world declined relative to its post-Second World War apex.

The end of the Cold War produced a complicated world, with contradictory implications for American power and foreign policy. The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe resulted in a single, integrated international political economy of growing interdependence and complexity, re-enforced by the tremendous rise of international economic transactions and trade with countries such as China as well as the development of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the creation of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Accordingly, all states and parts of the world, including the United States, are increasingly interdependent economically as the world has become a single international political economic system or globalised world.

The United States, the West, and liberal capitalism appeared to have prevailed as many optimistically proclaimed. Yet, the international economic crises of the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, such as the collapse of the Mexican peso, the ‘Asian tiger’ economies, the Argentinean and other South American economies, and, most recently, the 2008 global economic meltdown, highlight the extent to which the United States is heavily interwoven in the fabric of the larger global economic system. Such a world of global complexity, interdependence, economic growth, and instability increasingly affected American foreign-policy priorities and actions.

The end of the Cold War did not signify the end of conflict in the world. In some ways, the greater complexity in which global issues proliferated and power diffused produced more, albeit different, crises and challenges for American statecraft. In the present context, especially for Americans, the most obvious conflict revolves around terrorism. Although the issues and problems surrounding international terrorism have existed for some time, they became salient for most Americans in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on important national symbols on American soil: the World Trade Center towers in New York City, which were completely destroyed, and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. As the recent experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan testify (and unlike
the Persian Gulf [1991] or Kosovo [1999] wars) the war on terrorism has not been, nor will be, an easy one against easily identifiable enemies that can be accomplished quickly and convincingly.

In addition to terrorism, other types of international conflict persist: disputes arising from traditional rivalries and over national frontiers such as in the Middle East and between India and Pakistan; changes in the authority and influence of Powers like China, Russia, and the European Union; ethnic strife over and within state boundaries; the demand and need for scarce resources like water; the movement and migration of peoples, demographic change, and growth of refugee populations; economic competition and the growing inequality between rich and poor within regions and states; the environment and pollution, such as deforestation and global warming; and more. These and other problems create difficult challenges for American foreign policy and the conversion of United States power into preferred outcomes.

Clearly, whilst the post-Cold War era saw both greater opportunities and constraints for the evolution and exercise of American power, there has been little consensus over how best to address these issues. Not surprisingly, given the collapse of the Soviet Union and communism, no dominant and consistent foreign-policy pattern prevailed during George H.W. Bush’s Administration (1988–92). Instead, it displayed a ‘mixture of competence and drift, of tactical mastery set in a larger pattern of strategic indirection’.17 In other words, the first Bush Administration’s foreign policy appeared to be caught between the legacy of the Cold War past and the great uncertainty of a post-Cold War future. After entering office in 1993, the Clinton Administration initiated several significant foreign policy actions in Haiti, Mexico, Bosnia, and the Middle East, as well as engineered the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization alliance to include Powers from the former Soviet alliance. For the most part, major national security failures were avoided whilst the Administration highlighted domestic policy and international economics. Most prominent in this regard were passage of NAFTA and the Uruguay round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade agreement that produced the WTO. However, neither administration succeeded in developing a coherent foreign policy approach to the changed environment.

The American response to the challenges of the twenty-first century has varied significantly across the two administrations in power since 2001. The strategies of engagement embraced by the George W. Bush and Barack Obama Administrations both reflected core elements of the American foreign-policy culture and attempted to address the central features of international context. However, each approach was driven by decidedly different conceptions of power and roles for the United States as a Great Power (perhaps the only global Power of the era).

In George W. Bush’s 2000 presidential election campaign, foreign-policy emphasis was on the need to reduce American commitments, emphasise vital national interests, and exercise greater humility abroad in response to what was commonly described as a more benign international environment.18 However, not long into the Bush Administration’s first year, a distinct approach to American power and influence began to take shape: a ‘hegemonist’ view of American foreign policy, committed to United States power and the willingness to use it. Numerous members of the Administration tended to view power, especially military power, as the essential ingredient for American security, whilst also rejecting traditional emphases on deterrence, containment, multilateralism, and international rules and agreements. It was, in short, a view fundamentally committed to maintaining what they characterised as a unipolar world and acting unilaterally.19 Even before the terrorist attacks of September 2001, Bush’s Administration rejected multilateral agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol and the International Criminal Court as well as other international commitments. This approach was fuelled by 11 September 2001. In reaction to the terrorist strikes, the Administration openly embraced a more aggressive foreign policy, revolving around a global war on terrorism, preemption, and the pursuit of international primacy. In the
words of Bush’s National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice: ‘I really think that this period is analogous to 1945 to 1947 in that the events so clearly demonstrated that there is a big global threat, and that it’s a big global threat to a lot of countries that you would not have normally thought of as being in the coalition. That has started shifting the tectonic plates in international politics’.20

New enemies (Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, Saddam Hussein and Iraq, and terrorism) replaced the old enemy of communism. After 9/11, in the minds of members of the Bush Administration, the ‘United States was [now] faced with an irreconcilable enemy; the sort of black-and-white challenge that had supposedly been transcended in the post-Cold War period, when the great clash of ideologies [had] ended, [and] had now reappeared with shocking suddenness’.21 Bush’s global war on terrorism resulted in a major defence build-up, an emphasis on ‘homeland security’, an effort to distinguish between friends and foes, and a heavy reliance on the use of force abroad. The Administration’s strategy became much more unilateral in orientation, saw little relevance of international organisations like the United Nations (UN), and officially emphasised the threat and use of ‘overt’ preemptive (or preventive) strikes. Together, such a policy orientation has become known as the Bush Doctrine as reflected in Bush’s 2002 foreign policy address at West Point.22

Bush immediately set about refocusing his Administration to engage in a global war on terrorism, beginning with Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban and turning to Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein. No issue seemed more central than Iraq. Despite international resistance and some internal disagreement, once Bush decided to use force to remove Hussein’s regime, Administration officials and the President himself forcefully advanced the case that Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction and ties to al-Qaeda required assertive military action.23 After securing congressional support and despite resistance from much of the international community, especially France, Russia, and China on the UN Security Council, the Administration, in concert with a ‘coalition of the willing’ composed chiefly of Great Britain and a few other countries, invaded Iraq in March 2003. By May, American forces had captured Baghdad, the Hussein regime collapsed, and Bush officially declared ‘mission accomplished’ on 2 May 2003.

At first, the public and Congress rallied around this action. However, with the initial military campaign over, the more difficult task of rebuilding the Iraqi government and nation-building ensued. Whilst resistance to the American occupation soon grew and violence seemed to increase daily, the weapons of mass destruction that Iraq was alleged to possess were never found; American-led search units soon concluded officially that they had never existed. Nor were any ties to al-Qaeda discovered, although al-Qaeda soon became active in the insurgency against American forces and the Iraqi regime that Washington sought to empower. Moreover, Bush’s rejection of the international community left the United States isolated and widely distrusted overseas. By late 2006, citizens in thirty-three of thirty-five countries surveyed believed that the war in Iraq had increased the likelihood of terrorist attacks around the world.24 Ninety-eight percent of European Commission members and 68 percent of members in the European Parliament disapproved of Bush’s foreign policies.25 At home, a July 2008 survey found ‘improving America’s standing in the world’ to be the general public’s top United States foreign policy priority.26

With the costs of the war spiralling upward, Bush began to face increased unrest and challenges, and his public approval began to decline steadily. Distance from the 9/11 attacks, coupled with increasing costs in Iraq, persistent questions about the success of his global war on terrorism, and the decline of American prestige and reputation around the world (combined with domestic economic problems and other challenges) eroded Bush’s support. It exacerbated his lame-duck status to the point that his presidency was effectively crippled in November 2006, when the Democrats seized control of both houses of Congress in a stunning political backlash against Bush.

Riding public discontent with the Bush Administration, the Democrat, Barack Obama, emerged as the victor in the 2008 presidential elections; he promised to restore American prestige
and reputation and re-engage with the world so as to repair relations with friends and allies and assert American power and influence in a softer and more conciliatory fashion. Whilst contending with the so-called ‘Great Recession’ of 2007–9, Obama effectively sought ‘indispensability’ instead of primacy or dominance. Although the problems Obama faced as he began his efforts were not so dramatic as those of the economic depression and global war of the 1930s and 1940s, few Presidents since the Second World War have faced such a daunting array of challenges. In addition to contending with the legacy of the Iraq invasion, he faced challenges stemming from the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan (where the Taliban and al-Qaeda had re-emerged as viable opponents), a severe global economic crisis, urgent environmental and energy policy issues, and regional security and non-proliferation challenges in North Korea and Iran. Obama also confronted a political environment in Washington DC more divided along partisan lines than ever before in recent memory.

A considerable portion of Obama’s foreign policy involved trying to engineer a multilateral response through the G20 countries and international financial institutions to the global economic crisis. In addition to urgently needed attention on foreign economic policy, the Obama Administration also had to deal with a variety of national security issues that it inherited from previous administrations. The most pressing efforts concerned withdrawing American troops from Iraq and turning the war there over to the Iraqis whilst increasing American troop levels and involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, given the deteriorating and increasingly unstable situations in those countries. In addition, other issues needed to be addressed including the Arab-Israeli conflict, the future of Russia, oil dependency, immigration, global warming, and North Korea, Iran, and nuclear proliferation. Furthermore, substantive debates and divisions deepened on questions about the proper nature, uses, and balance amongst foreign instruments including diplomacy, force, aid, and others. The President and other Administration officials also actively sought to restore confidence in American leadership and promote the likelihood of multilateral responses in attempting to react and address such global problems.

According to the Obama team, the Bush White House was principally responsible for the decline of American standing in the international community. Questionable policy choices, unilateralism, unabashed claims of predominance and disregard for international institutions, agreements, and cooperation were especially blamed. In contrast to Bush, Obama argued that American power was most effectively applied in the velvet glove of cooperation. He thus aggressively pursued diplomatic engagement and multilateral cooperation, and he exhibited greater reliance on soft power and greater concern for global problems. The new Administration stressed a conception of American national interest that incorporated transnational concerns; a conception of power that included ‘soft’ as well as ‘hard’ forms; an emphasis on diplomacy and economic statecraft to a greater degree relative to military power; and greater involvement in multilateral institutions and support for international law.

Obama elaborated on his approach at an April 2009 press conference in Trinidad:

… the United States remains the most powerful, wealthiest nation on Earth, but we’re only one nation, and that the problems that we confront, whether it’s drug cartels, climate change, terrorism, you name it, can’t be solved just by one country. And I think if you start with that approach, then you are inclined to listen and not just talk. And so in all these meetings what I’ve said is, we have some very clear ideas in terms of where the international community should be moving; we have some very specific national interests … but we recognize that other countries have good ideas, too, and we want to hear them. … Countries are going to have interests, and changes in foreign policy approaches by my administration aren’t suddenly going to make all those interests that may diverge from ours disappear. What it does mean,
though, is, at the margins, they are more likely to want to cooperate than not cooperate. It means that where there is resistance to a particular set of policies that we’re pursuing, that resistance may turn out just to be based on old preconceptions or ideological dogmas that, when they’re cleared away, it turns out that we can actually solve a problem.29

In the administration’s first national security strategy, released in May 2010, Obama laid out the rationale for his course change in American foreign policy:

Our national security strategy is, therefore, focused on renewing American leadership so that we can more effectively advance our interests in the 21st century. We will do so by building upon the sources of our strength at home, while shaping an international order that can meet the challenges of our time. This strategy recognizes the fundamental connection between our national security, our national competitiveness, resilience, and moral example. And it reaffirms America’s commitment to pursue our interests through an international system in which all nations have certain rights and responsibilities.30

Time will tell whether the new Administration is successful in these efforts to grapple with the constraints and imperatives of the current international context.

The ultimate global challenge for the current Administration (indeed, for all Presidents since the end of the Cold war) might be called the ‘challenge of hegemony’ and the ‘challenge of legitimacy’. Clearly, in the current global environment:

The preeminence of American power today is unprecedented in modern history. No other great power has enjoyed such formidable advantages in military, economic, technological, cultural, or political capabilities. We live in a one-superpower world, and there is no serious competitor in sight. Other states rival the United States in one area or another, but it is the multi-faceted character of American power that makes it so commanding, far reaching, and provocative.31

Such global predominance obviously brings advantages, but it poses challenges as well. Amongst the most significant are the fear and uneasiness that it provokes in other countries, even those that are commonly allied with the United States.

Three types of global reactions are often generated in response to the rise of hegemonic Powers. First, the predominance of American strength can prompt other Powers to align with the United States for self-interested reasons. To accommodate and cooperate with the United States, Powers may ‘bandwagon’ (join in), ‘bond’ (build close ties and hope to influence United States decision-making as a trusted ally), or attempt to ‘penetrate’ American politics (take advantage of the open society and multiple access points to American officials in the executive branch and Congress to persuade decision-makers to adopt favourable policies). Second, United States hegemony is likely to trigger efforts by other states to rein in American power and resist American domination. Their efforts would include ‘balancing’ American power, ‘balking’ (ignoring United States requests) or foot-dragging in carrying them out to hinder American efforts. They also include ‘binding’, or attempting to use norms and institutions such as the UN and others to constrain American freedom of action, as well as ‘blackmail’, which involves threatening to take action that Washington opposes unless the United States offers compensation. Finally, to encourage resistance to American efforts, others may attempt ‘delegitimisation’, portraying the United States as irresponsible, arrogant, and selfish (actions readily seen in a variety of places in recent years).32

American decision-makers will increasingly struggle to grapple with these responses to the global power of the United States. In one estimation,
September 11 reminded those Americans with a rosy view that not all the world sees U.S. primacy as benign. … American global primacy is one of the causes of this war. It animates both the terrorists’ purposes and their choice of tactics. To groups like al-Qaeda, the United States is the enemy because American military power dominates their world, supports corrupt governments in their countries, and backs Israelis against Muslims; American cultural power insults their religion and pollutes their societies; and American economic power makes all these intrusions and desecrations possible. Japan, in contrast, is not high on al-Qaeda’s list of targets, because Japan’s economic power does not make it a political, military, and cultural behemoth that penetrates their societies.33

In other words, the vastness and pervasiveness of American power have complex and contradictory implications. In addition, ‘if a new world order is to be established under American aegis, then the United States must appear as a just and trustworthy leader’.34 Given the world’s complexity and diversity and the United States’ tendency to act unilaterally (usually in the name of liberalism, democracy, and human rights) it is likely that the United States will not only remain the most powerful country in the world. It may slowly, but inevitably, experience greater challenges to its power and foreign policy in the future, more balancing and delegitimation than bandwagoning. Such may be the paradoxical nature of American power in contemporary and future international politics.

In the end, confronting these problems may capture the priorities for American foreign policy under the Obama Administration and its successors, focusing on building multilateral responses to international issues, setting values-based examples in word and deed, and adapting to cultural and ideological differences. For United States diplomacy and statecraft, being ‘indispensable’ in this way may address foreign apprehensions about America’s predominant power and leadership in international affairs. However, to be successful, such an approach must be rooted in the fabric of American foreign-policy culture and, as well, navigate the increasingly contentious political environment in Washington DC. Consensus is necessary for coherent, sustained, White House-led foreign policy. Consensus, however, rests on clarity of threat, purpose, and interest, making it a rare commodity in the post-Cold War world.

Notes


5 Richard A. Melanson, American Foreign Policy since the Vietnam War (Armonk, NY, 2005).


9 Cecil V. Crabb, The Doctrines of American Foreign Policy: Their Meaning, Role and Future (Baton Rouge, LA, 1982), 375.

10 Crabb, American Foreign Policy, 377.


12 Crabb, American Foreign Policy, 1–2.


15 See James M. Scott, Deciding to Intervene: American Foreign Policy and the Reagan Doctrine (Durham, NC, 1996); James M. Scott, ed., After the End: Making American Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War World (Durham, NC, 1998).


22 A more elaborate and detailed account of the Bush Administration’s post-9/11 strategy can be found in White House, The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (Washington, DC, 2002).


29 Barack Obama, ‘Press Conference’, (19 April 2009), Hilton Hotel. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

30 White House, National Security Strategy (Washington, DC, 2010), 1. Also see Barack Obama, Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the End of Combat Operations in Iraq (Washington, DC, 31 August, 2010).

31 Ikenberry, Imperial Ambitions, 1.

32 Walt, Taming American Power.


34 Trobjorn L. Knutsen, The Rise and Fall of World Orders (Manchester, 1999), 67.