

A Leader Without Followers?

The United States in World Politics after Bush

By Barry Buzan

Introduction

During the second half of the 20th century, the United States was without question an outstandingly successful leading power. It took over leadership of the West during the Second World War, and used that victory to bring Western Europe and Japan into the democratic sphere. It then led the West in the long and eventually successful struggle against the Soviet Union over whether industrial society would be organised on the principles of capitalist liberal democracy or centrally-planned totalitarianism. During the Cold War, the United States was instrumental in transforming some of the key practices of international relations, mainly within the Western camp, but increasingly beyond it. In particular, the US promoted a twin revolution by spreading the market as the key organising principle for the world economy, and multilateralism as the expected way of conducting the business of the society of states. Crucial to this was a vast increase in the number and function of intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) as the forums in which the global economy was managed and the practice of multilateral diplomacy pursued. Within the overarching framework of the Cold War, with its

bipolar balance of power and omnipresent threat of nuclear incineration, the market and multilateralism steadily transformed the international relations of the world outside the communist bloc. By creating global trade and financial regimes, the US pushed the threat of great power wars and balance of power behaviour to the margins. Nowhere was this transformation more obvious than in Western Europe, where the rise of what has now become the EU created an expanding sphere of post-Westphalian international politics. Even before the end of the Cold War China was being drawn into the global market economy, and with its ending the transformation that had been underway for several decades became effectively global with only a few minor holdouts. The US was an effective leader 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.

All of that said, I do not want to create the impression that this was some sort of friction-free golden age for US leadership. There were intra-allied disputes aplenty within NATO, and all of the US's alliances, and trade and financial negotiations were often fractious, difficult and protracted. There were huge, but not fatal disasters, most obviously the Vietnam War, and glaring hypocrisies in the contrast between the US's rhetoric about human rights and democracy, and its practical support for repressive dictatorial regimes. The US was far from universally loved. But despite all of this, the US did win the Cold War, did succeed in spreading liberal economic values widely (much less so with liberal political values), and did strengthen the society of states by equipping it with an unprecedented array of multilateral institutions. It remained in principal (though not always in practice) committed to multilateralism, and because of that commitment was able to create a zone of peace in the capitalist core that defied the predictions of both Realists and Marxists.

Since the late 1990s, however, and very sharply since 2003, the US has in many ways become the enemy of its own 20th century project. It has increasingly downgraded, or rejected altogether, its commitment to multilateralism, and turned against many of the IGOs that it was instrumental in creating. It has retreated from leadership on trade, and lost ground as the

undisputed financial leader. It has instead projected a rhetoric and practice of sovereignty and unilateralism and celebration of its own power, the effect of which has been increasingly to unravel the self-binding of earlier decades and to undermine the loyalty of the US's followers, particularly, but not only, in western Europe.

This development raises three vital questions about the future:

1. Will the US want to continue to play the role of world leader in the coming decades?
2. If it does, will it be able to continue its past success in attracting and holding followers?
3. Will the issues likely to dominate international politics in the coming decades tend to strengthen or weaken the attractiveness and legitimacy of US leadership?

The next section will answer 'probably yes' to the first question and 'probably no' to the second. The section following will review five issues likely to be prominent on the agenda of world politics and argue that most, if not all, of these will probably work against the maintenance of US leadership in anything like the form it had during the last half of the 20th century. The conclusions will look briefly at the consequences of this outcome for international society.

The US as a World Leader

Will the US continue to want to be world leader, and if it does, will it be able to sustain its Cold War success in attracting and holding followers? There are good reasons to think that the US will want to continue in its global leader role. One indicator of this is its willingness to sustain a military budget more or less equal to that of the rest of the world combined despite the fact that it no longer has a serious military rival. Such expenditure underpins the US's claim to be the sole superpower, and thus the only member of an exclusive club of one entitled to claim special rights in relation to the management of international society. Sole superpower status also creates a certain demand pull for leadership. Americans are by no means alone in thinking of themselves as the 'indispensable state' when it comes to questions of world order and global management. Although, as witness the International Criminal Court and the Kyoto Environmental agreements, the US does not have a veto, US leadership or opposition can make or break the kinds of collective action that are possible for international society. Responding collectively to crises is more difficult without US leadership and resources. Underpinning this demand pull from outside is a habit of leadership now engrained into US institutions and self-image for more than 60 years. That habit is internally supported by those strong elements of American exceptionalism fired by the idea that the US forms of polity (democracy), economy (capitalism) and society (individualism) represents the right and inevitable future for all of humankind. This self-perception was greatly reinforced by victory in the Cold War and the subsequent emergence of the US as the sole superpower. One should not forget that the US is still a revolutionary state, and that the messianic elements of US foreign policy reflect not just the strong religiosity of its society, but also its very much alive revolutionary tradition. More instrumentally, there is awareness amongst US elites that their own and the

country's prosperity and stability depend on the international trade and finance arrangements that fund its deficits and keep its consumer prices low.

Although for the reasons just given the probability is that the US will continue to want to be world leader, one needs to keep in mind two possible counter-arguments. The first is that a costly failure, most obviously in the Middle East, could fuel a desire to retreat from the burdens and pains of leadership. The second is the possibility of return to the long tradition of isolationism that dominated US foreign policy before the Second World War. These two elements could easily reinforce each other. American exceptionalism can cut both ways. The revolutionary tradition can support messianic engagement with the world, but it is also open to the attractions of the more utopian line of revolutionary thinking that wishes to preserve the purity of the revolution by isolation, and which limits the obligation of the revolution to teaching by force of example rather than by more engaged forms of proselytising. A resounding defeat for engagement could make isolationism, probably in the form of 'offshore balancing' a more saleable option in US electoral politics.

If the US remains willing to lead, will anyone follow? I will examine this question more closely in the next section, but here it is worth noting the extent to which shared values and visions between the US and its followers have already declined, particularly across a widening Atlantic. Partly this is to do with the turn to unilateralism and the conspicuous abandonment of commitments to multilateralism and self-binding under the Bush administration noted above. A good symbol of this is the replacement of talk about 'friend and allies' or 'the free world' with a much harsher and more instrumental line about 'coalitions of the willing'. Although key institutions of the

West, such as NATO, still exist, they have been largely pushed to the margins of where the action is in global high politics. Anti-Americanism is now strong, though obviously not new. But Cold War anti-Americanism was based mainly on ideological grounds and as such provided the foundations for friends, allies and followers of the US as well as for its enemies, supporting the creation and maintenance of shared identities on both sides. Today's anti-Americanism is more culturally based, and more corrosive of shared identities. It questions whether an unsustainable 'American way of life' is an appropriate model for the rest of the world. It looks at health (obesity) and welfare (tens of millions without medical insurance) issues; at a seeming US inclination to use force as the first choice policy instrument; at the influence of religion in politics; at a US government openly comfortable with the use of torture; and at a federal environmental policy still 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. This kind of anti-Americanism corrodes the very foundations of what 'the West' used to mean, and raises the possibility that the idea of 'the West' was just a passing epiphenomenon of the Cold War.

Although one should never underestimate the capacity of the US for renewal, innovation and re-invention, there is no doubt that the two-terms of the Bush administration have asset-stripped half-a-century of respect for, goodwill towards and trust in US leadership. And it is far from clear that all this can just be blamed on the Bush administration, and hope therefore vested in a 'return to normal' once it exits from office. The Bush administration certainly had its unique idiosyncrasies, but it also reflected, and helped to consolidate, a shift in the centre of gravity of US politics. There will certainly be changes of style and rhetoric in a post-Bush administration, but it is far less clear that there will be big changes of substance.

How will all this carry forward into the issues that are likely to dominate world politics in the coming decades?

Five Challenges for US Leadership

I have already ventured far into the hazardous (but fun, and intellectually stimulating) realms of futurology, and am about to go further in, so now is the time to register the usual caveats about the perils of prediction in world politics. My colleague Mick Cox rightly likes to quote Harold Macmillan's line about 'events, dear boy, events' as a good antidote to the pretensions of International Relations scholars who think they can tell what the future will look like. Events – think of 9/11 – have a way of derailing such prognostications. So what follows is on 'other things being equal' terms, even though they may turn out not to be. I pick five areas which on the bases of past momentum and present dynamics are likely to be central to whether the US can lead and whether others will follow.

The Global War on Terrorism (GWOt)

I have argued at length elsewhere (*International Affairs*, 82:6, 2006, 1101-18) that the GWOt is unlikely to provide an issue anything like comparable to the Cold War in sustaining and legitimising US leadership, and I will not repeat all of that here. The main caveat to that argument is if terrorists raise their game very considerably from the levels we have seen to date, either by mounting more spectacular attacks (using weapons of mass destruction for example) or by increasing the number of attacks. If that happens, then the GWOt could become a durable macro-securitisation like the Cold War, and the US might well be able to use it to sustain leadership over a broad group of followers. But if things go on as they have done since 9/11, then terrorism will probably not be seen as a sufficiently large threat to sustain the costly and controversial apparatus of the GWOt.

To be clear, I am not arguing that the threat from terrorism is inconsequential or temporary. In my view, the threat from terrorism is, and

will remain for the long term, a significant problem for the type of society in which we now live. One part of this problem, and not the biggest, is the hugely counterproductive effect of US policies in the Middle East, which appear to have served as an effective recruiting sergeant for the likes of Al Qaeda. This means that the West will have to face threats from Islamic extremists for at least a generation or two, possibly longer. The bigger part of the problem is that pointed to by Martin Rees, which is that in this phase of human development, large powers of destruction are becoming ever more easily and widely available to ever smaller groups of people. Partly this is to do with evolving technologies for causing damage, and partly to do with the structural vulnerabilities of ever larger, more densely packed and more interdependent human populations. Whereas it used to take great power-sized human collectivities to construct major means of destruction such as nuclear weapons, now quite small groups can do so, or in the case of viruses, whether biological or digital, even individuals can create and use instruments of great destructive power. How societies are to preserve and manage liberal values when disaffected minorities can access such threats is a massive political question that is related to current concerns about terrorism, but takes us well beyond the immediate concerns of the GWOt.

If threats of this sort are to be responded to with endless 'long wars', then liberal values will be corroded by the very measures taken to defend them. If the response to terrorism is constructed in terms of criminality rather than war, then open civil societies will have to adjust to terrorism by accepting a certain level of disruption and casualties as the price of freedom. This would take considerably more political maturity than is normally found in Western democracies, but the fact that Europeans and Americans find it acceptable

that 50,000 of their fellow citizens should die on the roads each year suggests that such tolerance for structural threats is far from unrealistic. If this is the way to go, then on performance to date, European societies are much more likely to provide the model for how to deal with terrorism than is the US.

The Rise of China

For the US, an increasing securitisation of China as a threat to the US position as sole superpower is one of the key developments that seem likely to erode US commitment to the GWoT. It is not possible to have two dominant securitisations, so the more the US focuses on China, the less important the GWoT will seem.

The key argument here is that it seems almost certain that the steady drumbeat of concern in Washington about rising China as a peer competitor will get louder as China does indeed grow in power. This drumbeat is longstanding and deeply rooted. To the extent that Realist thinking dominates in Washington, and the US retains its existing commitment to being the sole-superpower and not allowing any challengers, then a rising China must appear threatening to the US. Since it is the mere fact of China's rising power that drives this concern, it will make little difference in Washington whether China rises 'peacefully' or not. But this question of the nature of the China that rises will be crucial to whether others share US perceptions of China as a threat.

If a rising China becomes ultra-nationalist, aggressive and militarist, then it could well be that others would share US perceptions and so provide followers for US leadership. But the Chinese leadership is well aware of this danger, and determined to avoid the mistakes made by Germany, Japan and Soviet Union in their rising period. If they can carry off their design for a 'peaceful rise' then it becomes entirely possible that US perceptions of China as threatening will not be shared widely if at all. Those voices

currently in opposition to US hegemony, and speaking of the need for a more multipolar world order, might well welcome China's rise. If China is relatively benign, Europe will not care much about its rise, Russia may well continue to bandwagon with China against the US, and India will probably continue to play the US and China against each other as it does now, leaving the main economic and political costs of balancing China to the US.

The big question mark is Japan, which since the end of the Cold War has not only maintained, but somewhat strengthened its alliance with the US, and whose relationship with China remains deeply clouded by unsettled legacies from Japan's invasion of China during the 1930s and 40s. If China's rise is benign, but the US securitises it anyway, Japan will face very difficult choices. If it stays with the US, it would become the front line in a new Cold War between Washington and Beijing. That might not look attractive compared with the options of either resolving the history problems and bandwagoning with China or following India into a more independent, middle-ground position between Washington and Beijing.

Whatever the room for debate about timing, there is a high probability that China will rise significantly in the coming decades. There is also a high probability that the US will find this threatening. But if China conducts its rise peacefully, this US concern will be a parochial one, shared by few, possibly none, of the other great powers. In this case the US will be a leader without followers. And since China is, for its own reasons, broadly on board with the GWoT, there is no scope for the US to try to link 'the China threat' to the terrorist one.

The Middle East

Disagreements over policy in the Middle East already rank as one of the conspicuous areas of disaffection between the US and Europe, and this seems likely to continue. There is no doubt

that the Middle East is a profound mess and likely to remain so. This mess is deep rooted and has many causes, both internal and external, that I do not have the space to go into here. The main point for the question of future US leadership is that many of the US interventions into the Middle East are widely perceived to have been disastrous, not only feeding the terrorist problem but deepening the many tragedies in the region. The occupation of Iraq looks set to generate far more, and bigger, problems than it has solved. More or less unconditional US support for Israel is a longstanding Washington idiosyncrasy that inspires little enthusiasm elsewhere, and has hamstrung the US from pushing decisively towards a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine problem. This festering sore has grown steadily worse, with Israel creating ever more difficult facts on the ground, and assisting in the (also self-)destruction of a coherent Palestinian negotiating partner. US support for the Saudi regime helps keep in power a government whose domestic deals with Wahabi Islamists recycles large sums of oil money into the support of Islamic fundamentalism, though here it has to be said that Europeans are just as culpable. Perhaps only on the question of preventing the proliferation of WMD, does US policy in the Middle East enjoy much support, but even that is undermined by the hypocrisy of the US turning a blind eye to Israel's construction of a substantial nuclear arsenal while seeking to forbid Arab states and Iran from acquiring their own deterrents.

The basic point here is that except on the WMD issue, US policy in the Middle East is unlikely to attract followers. After the Iraq fiasco, even Britain would have trouble doing so. Russia, China and increasingly India have their own interests in the region which are often competitive with those of the US. Like China, Japan is interested mainly in the supply of oil, and cares little about Middle East politics because it assumes, probably rightly, that almost any owner of the oil would want and need to sell it. The US tie to Israel looks unlikely

to change and will continue to poison Washington's position in the region. Bad US policies and competing interests in the region from other powers provide no foundations for US leadership.

Liberal Values

One of the foundations of US legitimacy as world leader in the six decades since the end of the Second World War has been its support for liberal values. To simplify a very complicated topic, the US has championed political liberal values in the form of democracy and human rights, and economic liberal values in the form of free(er) trade, and financial liberalisation. There has always been a very substantial element of hypocrisy in this which should not be ignored. During the Cold War the US often favoured anti-communists over democrats, and treated democratic India more as an enemy than as a friend (while arming its military-ruled rival Pakistan). More was done in relation to human rights, but not where these got in the way of the market or anti-communism. Much was done for opening up trade and finance, but the US protected good parts of its own economy (most notoriously agriculture), and exploited the advantages that holding the global reserve currency gave it in relation to trade deficits and inflation. Yet even so, much was done. Democracy was supported in some places, barriers to global trade and finance were stripped away to a very significant degree, and human rights were established as an issue on the international agenda.

At this point, however, there is little scope left for US leadership on liberal issues. The GWoT means that Washington is now under pressure to prefer anti-terrorist governments to democratic ones. US abuses of human rights in Iraq (Abu Ghraib) the GWoT (Guantanamo Bay, 'extraordinary' renditions, and a seeming government acceptance of torture), and its fierce resistance to the International Criminal

Court, have gutted Washington's credibility to say much about human rights. The financial world has taken on a globalised life of its own, and as competitors arise to the dollar as reserve currency may no longer need US leadership. On trade, the US has largely ceased to lead anyway. Its weakening economic position makes it more protectionist, and the current crop of Democratic Party presidential candidates look likely to be even less enthusiastic about further trade liberalisation (except in bilateral arrangements favourable to the US) than the Bush Republicans have been.

The Environment

Environmental issues are the wild card of international relations. They could generate crises in many different forms (climate change; sea level change; the rapid spread of fatal or disabling diseases; the poisoning effects of the man-made chemical bath in which we now all live; rocks from space crashing into the planet; and suchlike). These crises might arrive tomorrow, or ten or a hundred years from now, or (less likely) they might never arrive, so it is hard to tell when (if) they will make their impact. They represent the 'events' problem for prediction in spades. When (if) they do arise, they could easily dominate the international

agenda, radically changing political priorities and pushing more traditional problems into the background. On some of these issues, the US would, because of its strong technological position, be an obvious leader. That seems likely to be true if the news was that a large asteroid or comet was going to collide with Earth in a few decades time, and perhaps also if disease control was the issue. On global warming, however, the American commitment to a high consumption lifestyle, and its resistance to pollution controls, has, in the eyes of many, already defined the US more as part of the problem than as the solution.

The impact of the environmental wild card on the question of US leadership is thus extremely difficult to predict. Certain kinds of developments could rescue US leadership and put it back into the driving seat. Others, most obviously pollution and global warming, could add to the disaffection with the US that is already eroding its leadership standing. Yet even here one cannot underestimate the capacity of the US for reinventing itself. Odd combinations of religious take-up of environmental stewardship, corporate interests in eco-profits, and local politics generating innovative approaches to environmental management could yet counterbalance the current inertia and denial in Washington about climate change.

Conclusions

On most of the big issues just surveyed, the argument suggests that it is unlikely that the US will be able to recover the sort of leadership status it enjoyed between 1945 and 2003. The main caveats to this conclusion are that a major escalation of terrorist activity, or certain kinds of environmental crisis might revive US leadership, but neither can be counted on.

If the era of US leadership is now winding down, this points not to an alternative leader taking its place in some kind of hegemonic transition, but to a world with no superpowers. Such a world would still have several great powers influential within and beyond their regions: the EU, Russia, China, Japan, the US, possibly India. It would also have many substantial regional powers such as Brazil, South Africa, Turkey and Iran. For the foreseeable future, only the EU and China could hope to bid for superpower status, but neither seems likely any time soon to develop the necessary political qualifications to step into a world leader role.

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. For those who focus on the improvement and extension of global governance, the weakening of US leadership and the de-centering of international society would appear to be a serious backward step. But for those who think that the tensions among a rampant global economy, a weak interstate society and a humankind still deeply divided by identities laid down centuries or

millennia ago, are becoming too great to handle, some retreat from the ambitions of globalisation might be welcome. Perhaps global governance has been too ambitious an aim at this stage of human history, with the attempt creating more management problems than current human social and political capacities are able to solve. A less ambitious world order, with regions looking after themselves, more might well remain peaceful and involve fewer frictions and failures.

Whatever its merits, a more regionalised world order would, however, mark a retreat from universalist liberal agendas of both a political and an economic sort. Smaller states and peoples within regions that looked more after themselves would risk becoming the vassals of their local suzerain power, having little or no recourse to outside help or support. The global market would weaken, local great powers would have more say in their regions, and cultural and political diversity would be freer to go their own way. This might all be quite manageable given that ideological differences would be far less than during the 20th century, though it might leave zones of chaos and/or conflict in parts of Africa and the Middle East. Although some kinds of global management problems can be reduced by moving towards a more decentred, probably regional, world order, the big question mark would be over how such a diffuse, pluralist international society could handle planetary problems such as those likely to come from the environment.

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