

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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A Weakened Superpower: What is America's Role in the World?

In 1796, when George Washington decided not to seek a third term as president, he warned the young Republic about the dangers of foreign entanglements. His counsel produced the policy of isolationism. That policy was reinforced by the Monroe Doctrine (1823), which largely defined America's world role well into the 20th century. In the Spanish-American War (1898), the US grabbed territory, but was reluctant to be involved in major international areas of disagreement; it remained rather isolated. The US belatedly entered World War I and then President Wilson sought to remake the world with his 14 Points (e.g., the League of Nations) at the Versailles Peace Conference. His vision failed. The Senate never ratified the Treaty of Versailles and the US never joined the League. America slipped back into isolationism. But with World War II, America became a world power, engaged on every continent. With the rise of communism, the US adopted the policy of containment, which meant it would not overthrow communism, but the US would contain it. The Korean War, the Marshall Plan, NATO and even the Viet Nam War all manifested this policy of containment. Containment worked, for the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s. With the rise of belligerent, terroristic Islam, the US under President Bush redefined its role as the principal antagonist of this brand of Islam.

Under President Obama, the US role in the world is changing. What is the vital center of US foreign policy? What is Obama's vision of the US position in the complicated world? Is the world's perception of the US changing? Do US allies trust America? How these questions are answered is important, for the world of the 21st century is very different. China is in resurgence and clearly seeks to be the dominant Asian power. For that reason, Japan is re-examining its role in Asia and is having a national conversation about rearmament. North Korea is now ruled by a young totalitarian, whose delusions of grandeur are frightening and potentially destabilizing. The Middle East is in total disarray. Syria is destroying itself and Iran is seeking to dominate the eastern Mediterranean with its Shiite brand of Islam. Although it is in discussions with the US and Europe about its nuclear program, few doubt that its ambitions to dominate have subsided. Europe (the EU) is virtually pacifistic and eschews any kind of military confrontation with Russia or anyone else for that matter. The EU continues to enjoy the umbrella of US protection (e.g., NATO) but is unwilling to pay for that protection. Finally, of course is Russia under Putin. Putin has grabbed Crimea and is fostering significant unrest in eastern Ukraine, all in clear violation of the 1994 agreement between Russia, America, Britain and Ukraine, which promised to surrender its unclear weapons in exchange for secure, recognized borders. Putin is ignoring this 1994 agreement and the US and Europe are doing virtually nothing, except for a few sanctions on a select number of Russian leaders.

In international affairs, perception is reality, and the world perceives that the US is weak, or at least unwilling to act decisively in all these areas of international crisis. The respected columnist David Ignatius has summarized this perception correctly: “Under Obama, the United States has suffered some real reputational damage. . . . This damage, unfortunately, has been largely self-inflicted by an administration that focuses too much on short-term messaging. At key turning points—in Egypt and Libya during the Arab Spring, in Syria, in Ukraine and, yes, in Benghazi—the administration was driven by messaging priorities rather than sound, interests-based policy.” As a result, the perception of weakness haunts Obama. While in Manila at the end of April, President Obama tried to defend himself and his policies. It was actually rather sad to watch him become overly defensive and essentially quite irritable. But when Obama speaks of due caution, the world hears reluctance—“especially when it comes to the most basic issue for any superpower, its willingness to fight” (see *The Economist* of 3 May 2014, p. 9).

There are two fundamental reasons for this perception of weakness, of an unwillingness to act decisively. First, the world universally views America as a superpower and a superpower must keep its word, or it can never be trusted. In Syria, Obama drew his famous “red line” over Syria’s use of chemical weapons against its people. When Assad used such weapons, Obama did nothing. No one forced Obama to draw this “red line.” But once Assad so blatantly and arrogantly crossed that red line, American credibility was on the line as well. In response to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, he threatened fierce sanctions, “only to unveil underwhelming ones.” The cumulative message of such things is weakness. Second, Obama has failed to build the kind of coalitions among like-minded democracies “to police the international system.” His diplomacy with Iran and Russia has led to concessions that are disturbing and worrisome. As *The Economist* muses, “Credibility is about reassurance as well as the use of force.” Credibility is easily lost and most difficult to rebuild. That is where America is under President Obama. Some may argue that this is unfair, but it is nonetheless true.

It is in the Middle East that American timidity is most serious. Primarily because of Syria and the infamous “red line,” there is the widespread impression that the US has turned into a pussycat. American foes are rejoicing but American friends perceive abandonment. *The Economist* captures the result: “It . . . has spurred allies to look out for themselves. Israel has cultivated military and economic ties with China and India. Gulf states are arming themselves: Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE have all recently ordered huge arsenals.” In addition, as Iran continues to make progress toward nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia has openly talked of seeking atomic weapons as well. None of these developments are especially welcome in the volatile Middle East.

In short, America as a superpower is still the most powerful nation of the planet militarily. Yet, the perception now is that the US lacks the will to exercise that power, that it will no longer deter the destabilizing forces in the world. The power to deter evil and/or contain it has been a mainstay of American foreign policy since World War II. After the collapse of communism in Russia and Eastern Europe, a new international order emerged. The US was the key to sustaining that new order. If the US is indeed losing its will to deter and enforce the elements of this international order, there is no one else to do

so. Arguably, Americans are weary of this role and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars explain this weariness. But if the decline of America's ability to deter is real, what will this new order look like? The growing power of China, the resurgence of Russia and the growth of Shiite Islam (principally Iran) are hardly positive aspects of this new order. *The Economist* concludes, "Some will celebrate the decline of America's ability to deter. But wherever they live, they may find that whatever replaces the old order is much worse. American power is not half as scary as its absence would be."

See *The Economist* (3 May 2014), pp. 9, 23-26 and David Ignatius in the *Washington Post* (6 May 2014).