

## **Is the U.S. a Global Power in Decline?**

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Most now agree that the Bush Doctrine of unilateral pre-emptive/preventive war to defeat terrorism, stop nuclear proliferation, and democratize global politics, starting with Afghanistan and Iraq, is bankrupt.

The problem with the Bush Doctrine lies less at the surface in its grossly incompetent execution than in its flawed assumptions about American power: that the United States is a superpower, capable of inducing allies and compelling adversaries to bandwagon on American preferences for world order.

A tour of the principal regions of the globe, laboratory tests of the Bush Doctrine, falsifies the proposition that the United States is a superpower. The Iraqi invasion and the subsequent disastrous occupation illustrate, but scarcely reveal, the scope of the overextension of American power.

In northeast Asia, the United States has outsourced to China its efforts to stop North Korea from going nuclear. Conversely, China won't help to impose sanctions on Tehran to abide by the Non-Proliferation Treaty, since its ravenous appetite for oil equals that of the United States. China's economic leverage over the United States — over \$1 trillion in foreign reserves, hundreds of billions of dollars in trade surpluses, and a quarter of the U.S. foreign debt under the control of the Chinese central bank — nullify any pressure Washington might exert to induce greater Chinese respect for human rights or to elicit Chinese support for ending the genocidal conflict in oil-exporting Sudan.

The story is the same in south, southwest, and southeast Asia. The United States banks on a vulnerable, nuclear Pakistan, beset by ethnic divisions and rising Muslim fundamentalist pressures, to support the global war on terror. Washington cravenly bribes an ascendant India to balance rising Chinese influence by undermining the Non-Proliferation Treaty in agreeing to supply a non-signatory to the NPT with nuclear materials and know-how. The states of southeast Asia are increasingly drawn into the Chinese economic orbit and calmed by Beijing's charm diplomacy. Delhi, meanwhile, rejects the role Washington has cast for it as a counterweight to Beijing by increasing its political and economic cooperation with Beijing.

Latin and Central America are no less resistant to U.S. preferences. The Leftist drift in Latin America falls loosely under the influence of Venezuela's incendiary Hugo Chavez or Brazil's more moderate Luiz Inácio Lula Da Silva, while most states south of the border thumb their noses at American leadership as never before. One should have no illusion that the Mexican government will help any time soon in addressing the problem of over 11 million illegal Latinos in the United States whose emigration and billions of dollars in return transfers relax pressures on the governments to create jobs and economic opportunities for its citizens.

In Africa, the United States is also a no show--except for aid to fight the spread of HIV (but not to assist birth control). It has had no appreciable effect on stopping genocide from Rwanda in 1994, the Congo for over a decade, and now Sudan. The Bush administration has also reneged on its UN Millennium promise to increase assistance to Africa. The United States is at the bottom of donors at an assistance level of less than two-tenths of one percent of GDP.

To acknowledge the limits of American power is not to return to the discredited declinist debate of the late 1980s. There is no doubt that the United States is a global power, however much it may be bogged down in the Iraqi quagmire, isolated diplomatically, increasingly deep in debt, and challenged in world markets. It is the only state capable of projecting its military power around the globe. American economic power and technological leadership remain world class. Its \$11 trillion dollar economy dwarfs all others. American culture, whose creative fashions, music, television, media, and movies impacts on peoples around the world, especially the young, is an important soft power asset. America's open system of governance and respect and support for civil liberties and human rights commanded, at least until recently, worldwide admiration and emulation.

How can the United States regain its leadership role and increase its influence abroad? First, scrap the Bush Doctrine and superpower presumptions and scale U.S. security interests and aims to its real or potential power.

Second, actively and creatively engage American power around the world but in concert with other like-minded peoples, dedicated to open, transparent, and accountable government, to free market practices, and to the protection of civil liberties and human rights.

Third, focus on rebuilding the nation's domestic material power to ensure its continued economic and technological leadership: improve the quality of education at all levels, renew the nation's neglected infrastructure, decrease reliance on oil and fossil fuels for energy, and protect the environment, notably in coping with global warming.

Fourth, re-affirm respect for the rule of law, domestically and internationally, and for globally recognized moral norms and practices. The defections of the Bush administration from traditional American practices have incurred widespread condemnation, isolated the United States in the world community, delegitimized the exercise of American power and, worse, generated incentives for other states to do likewise.

Jettisoning the misguided and mischievous belief that the United States is a superpower, capable of dominating others, will not be easy and take time, upwards of a generation. Absent that change in thinking by political leaders and the American public, the United States risks going the way of failed empires whose reach was beyond their grasp.