

US under pressure shows confused leadership

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The United States in theory is the mightiest global power and will continue to be so over the next decade. The question is whether it is willing — and capable — of projecting power to remain at pole position, and of offering a social, political and economic model that attracts other countries.

The pivot to Asia is no longer a pivot, now it is a rebalancing. But what is the strategic objective? The Secretary of State spends much of his time brokering a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians — admirable, but how does it fit into a global context? What about what is happening in Egypt?

Edward Snowden gets asylum in Russia and all the US can do is voice its disappointment. In Syria, a civil war is still going on. Iran seems firmly on the road to possessing nuclear weapons. It is difficult to spot a trend guiding the observer to understand US actions around the globe.

The debate in the US about soft power and hard power is analytically and academically fascinating, but reveals a policy dilemma of which strategic objectives to pursue, which means to choose, and how to match objectives and means. Soft power is attractive — but effective only if backed up by hard power.

Currently, the US faces severe problems with regards to both soft and hard power.

For many decades, a pillar of US foreign policy was money, which was

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spent lavishly. Former President Ronald Reagan, upon being told that the Soviet Union had more of almost everything, allegedly asked: “What do we have more of?” The answer was: “Money, Mr President”. “Good, let’s use that,” he replied. No current or future American President will be able to say the same.

The rising debt and persistent deficits have put a bar on the US’ ability to mobilise its economic strength in pursuit of allies and to convince uncommitted countries of the virtue of its system. It may still be valid to call the US an “indispensable nation”, but this is less compelling a claim than five or 10 years ago.

For many countries, China is vying for top spot as economic partner; for some among the emerging markets and developing economies, China is winning. Still, the US can ride its luck, in the sense that many countries think it may bounce back with a revitalised economy.

THE NUCLEAR DOMINO

But the immediate challenge is a hard security issue. Nothing else throws into clearer relief the uncertainty and doubt about US leadership and long-term strategy, as the question of Iran and its alleged nuclear programme.

The world can, of course, live with a nuclear Iran as it has lived with several other nations possessing these weapons of mass destruction. The problem, though, is the geopolitical repercussions of a weakened US accepting such an outcome. Other key players will watch and draw conclusions for their own stance on the nuclear option.

Japan is the foremost example. Two of its neighbours, North Korea and China, have nuclear weapons. The restraint Japan has exercised over many decades is praiseworthy; Japan’s policy rests on the assumption that the US nuclear umbrella is credible. But if the US allows Iran to develop the bomb, it is more likely than not that Japan will reverse its stance.

The Middle East, as well, would be destabilised. It is hard to imagine that Saudi Arabia would register a nuclear-empowered Iran without “agonising reappraisal” (to borrow Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’ words) of its foreign and security policy.

Egypt — which, prior to its current political turmoil, was a cornerstone for stability and balance in the Middle East — would be faced with both Israel and Iran as nuclear powers without having such weapons in its own arsenal. How would it react?

In December last year, the President of Turkey stated that “Turkey will not accept a neighbouring country possessing weapons not possessed by Turkey herself. We are not underestimating this matter in any way”. In plain language this means that a nuclear armed Iran will lead to Turkey

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developing nuclear weapons.

Turkey is applying for membership of the European Union (EU); if it obtains nuclear weapons, it is overwhelmingly likely that the talks will falter. The Balkans, traditionally Europe’s powder keg, would suddenly see a new Turkey. Historical enemy Greece, which is slowly emerging from its trauma of economic crisis, would find itself confronted by not only an economically stronger but also nuclear-empowered Turkey. Greece would turn to the EU for support, locking future relations between the EU and a resurgent Turkey in a state of mutual distrust.

Russia would have two neighbours not far from its southern border who both possess the bomb and have historically been less than friendly. In the Caucasus, a number of small, vulnerable states would find themselves sandwiched between three nuclear powers — Russia, Iran and Turkey. Central Asia would be surrounded by six — Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey.

PARADOX OF POWER

Syria as an unresolved issue complicates the game. Under President Bashar Al Assad, it is close to Iran, geographically and politically. Its airspace is vital in case of a US and/or Israeli air strike or threats thereof. Militant groups can use its territory to retaliate against Israel and as a safe haven for planning terrorist actions elsewhere.

Iran knows that. The military conflict in Syria is not only a proxy war between various parties and a confrontation between Sunni and Shia Islam; it also poses the question of whether a threat of military action can force Iran to the negotiating table.

Power is wonderful as long as there is no need to use it. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown, actually wielding power erodes its “capital”. A superpower, in order to get its way without hollowing out its power “capital”, must gain the respect of its adversaries and support of steadfast allies.

All this requires that the world knows what the US stands for and which goals it pursues. In this regard, the US in the Snowden affair has been like a bull in a china shop, its behaviour perplexing adversaries and allies alike.

Ultimately, America’s virtual projection of power does not look so robust any more — which explains many of the current crises around the world that we might not have otherwise seen given a stronger, more determined US.