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## O SAY, CAN'T YOU SEE? THE INDISPENSABLE ROLE OF THE EXCEPTIONAL SUPERPOWER

— Robin Shepherd

Absence, it appears, does not make the heart grow fonder, nor the world a safer place for peace, stability, and democracy. Americans on both sides of the aisle may be forgiven for feeling more than a little aggrieved that having been widely and soundly excoriated for showing too much leadership for most of the two decades after the end of the Cold War, they are now faulted for showing too little.

Of course, as the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant reminded us: “Ought,” implies “Can.” In light of the unattractive outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of China and others as economic, and possibly military rivals, a still heavily armed Russia with a new sense of destiny and ambition, and the seeming indefatigability of Islamist terrorism, a significant part of the debate (domestic and international) on American leadership centers on whether the United States could have a decisive impact even if it wanted to.

Managing expectations about the limits of the possible may well be crucial in this discussion, and despite prevailing (and exaggerated) wisdoms about American decline, may ultimately be liberating for those who still believe that the US has an indispensable role in promoting freedom, preventing anarchy, and holding tyranny at bay.

But first, we need to state things as we see them, or rather how both friend and foe see US leadership today. To put it bluntly, they perceive weakness and ambiguity.

This is how they view the facts on the ground:

Russia invades South Ossetia (under the Bush administration it should not be forgotten) and

nothing happens. Russia annexes Crimea and causes chaos in eastern Ukraine. Nothing much happens. Iran embarks on a nuclear weapons program. Despite the best efforts of both Republican and Democrat administrations, it is still doing so.

Plans to promote a settlement to the Israel-Palestine conflict that have spanned three presidencies since the Oslo Accords of 1993 have come to nought. Much of the Middle East is at best back to form after the failure of the “Arab Spring,” with the US having little choice but to rehash the old routine of backing “helpful” autocracies; or the region languishes in chaos under the savagery of this year’s entrant as Islamist terror group number one in the form of Islamic State.

It goes further and wider. As events in Hong Kong have shown, China’s rise may be peaceful, but it is unlikely to be democratic. With some of the shenanigans in the East China Sea in mind (and not forgetting Tibet) it remains to be seen whether or for how long that “peaceful rise” mantra makes any sense.

The United States is even having problems controlling its own southern border. Latin American drug cartels seem as little concerned about robust American action in the world as Vladimir Putin. Such criticism is brutal, and there are several possible retorts. Chief among them is that while the US has not been able to manufacture a world with ideal outcomes, it has at least held the line.

One hesitates to speak too soon, but Russia has not invaded the Baltic states. The Kremlin knows the difference between Estonia and Crimea. Israel-Palestine is essentially intractable; it’s not

Washington's fault that they don't have a magic wand. The Middle East is an irretrievable mess going back at least to Sykes-Picot. Islamism can't be beaten; it can only be contained. China is too big to take on in any way that would matter to it. The US can't control the drugs problem in Los Angeles, never mind Colombia.

It might appear, then, that we are back to "Ought" implies "Can." What is the value in criticizing an alleged lack of American leadership when there's so little America can do anyway?

But the assumptions that underlie that question are misplaced.

We need to be clear about what leadership means. Above all, it means delivering a message: stating clearly and unambiguously what the West stands for, what it wants, and, crucially, what it is prepared to sacrifice to achieve it.

When Winston Churchill talked of a battle against evil, and said, "...we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end..." everyone knew what he meant. When Ronald Reagan told, not asked, Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down this wall," did anyone detect a note of ambiguity?

Neither of those two iconic 20th century leaders left a world absent of unsolved problems or unfulfilled goals. Leadership is not about omnipotence.

The United States remains by far the dominant military and economic power in the world today. It needs to remind people of that. It also needs to say clearly that it will sacrifice, in blood, and treasure and trade deals, to be the leading force for freedom not just today or tomorrow, but for the day after that, too.

At every turn, America should make life difficult for her enemies. Put them on notice that it is they, not America or the wider West, who should be looking over their shoulders. The moves may be incremental. We may sometimes grind to a halt; later to go once more unto the breach.

But it is the direction of travel that matters most. Holding the line will not do, and will not work.

Re-stating that message, and then acting upon it, is the indispensable leadership role of the exceptional superpower. The trouble is, right now, that message simply isn't getting through.

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