

AMERICA AND ITS IMAGE

Fixing Uncle Sam's Image Problem

Recognizing that America can't get it alone is the best way to boost the country's standing.

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Since 2000, the United States' standing has deteriorated in all parts of the world, and anti-Americanism has grown intense. The 2008 Pew Global Attitudes survey reveals that in the past eight years, favorable views of the United States fell from 78 percent to 30 percent in Germany, 50 percent to 22 percent in Argentina and 75 percent to 37 percent in Indonesia. Yet as bad as this looks, America's image problem can still be healed—if the next administration correctly diagnoses the problem.

Many Americans want to believe things will automatically get better when George W. Bush leaves office. There is a kernel of truth in this. The Bush administration has been amazingly incompetent in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan and, lately, Georgia. Yet the same administration has also improved America's relations with China and India, suggesting that not all of America's PR problems can be blamed on the 43rd president.

The discord actually dates from the end of the cold war, when Washington thoughtlessly disengaged from the world. After whipping up the Islamist mujahedin into a frenzy to defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the United States walked away from them once the communists were defeated—without thinking about the consequences. This oversight led directly to 9/11. Other allies like Pakistan were also dropped, and today Pakistan is a nuclear-armed—and deeply troubled—state.

In the 1990s, democracy promotion replaced anticommunism as Washington's overriding policy focus. Americans cheered relentlessly when the drunken Boris Yeltsin was elected in 1991. The Russian people suffered under his rule—but Americans seemed not to notice or care. Now Americans seem puzzled by the deep resentment Russians feel toward them. Yet Georgia was only the straw that broke the camel's back—not the cause of the current rift between Washington and Moscow.



Underlying all these events has been a central source: Washington's failure to think strategically. The solution, therefore, would be for the next president to revive old-fashioned strategic policymaking. This isn't a call for cynical realpolitik; the United States need not abandon its ideals. But it will have a better chance of realizing them if it takes a more prudent and strategic approach to world affairs.

In practice, this means recognizing that the United States can't do everything. Like any normal nation, it must prioritize. And it should view the world as a single geopolitical chessboard. This means that if Washington wants to improve its standing in, for example, Indonesia—the world's most populous Muslim nation—it must work to address the Arab-Israeli conflict. Such linkages count.

That said, the United States is still the world's strongest country. That means it has plenty of cards to play. As well as formidable hard power, Washington retains significant soft power—the ability to attract, not compel. Foreign elites still dream of sending their kids to U.S. universities (indeed, all three of my children are happy to study there). More broadly, the American Dream continues to excite the imagination of young people everywhere. Were such assets deployed more intelligently, Washington could work wonders.

That's especially so because Americans can't get everything they want through threats or force alone. Take the Islamic world, with some 1.2 billion inhabitants. Nowhere is the U.S. image problem worse. Again, the problem stems from poor policies, especially toward the Palestinian territories. During the cold war, Washington tried to maintain an evenhanded policy in the region. But since the Berlin Wall fell, Americans have dropped this evenhandedness in favor of a strong pro-Israel bias. American neocons are right to say that solving the Arab-Israeli conflict wouldn't magically resolve all of America's image problems. But it would get rid of the main source of poison. Indeed, the United States, Israel and the Palestinians would all profit from a quick move toward a two-state solution. Compromise is critical; America is no longer as mighty as it once was, and it has to learn to be pragmatic.

A similar pragmatism should apply to India and China. Washington should work to ensure their emergence as modern, rules-based countries—and not try to stand in their way. China's rise is unstoppable, as is India's. Best, therefore, to manage their ascendance intelligently. Fortunately, America and China (and India) have many common interests. Global warming, energy shortages, financial crises and health epidemics affect Americans, Chinese and Indians alike, and require cooperation to address.

This brings us to another key point: the need for multilateralism. The Bush administration got things badly wrong by acting as if U.S. security could be enhanced by demolishing or ignoring key agreements, like the Kyoto accords or the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. Yet this radical unilateralism only endangered the United States, by undermining the strong global consensus that restrains regimes like North Korea. While Americans like to show off their toughness by mocking multilateralism, strategic thinking shows that the United States is well served by strengthening, not undermining, international cooperation.

Fortunately, the economic meltdown may have finally changed Americans' views on this question. The crisis showed how vulnerable the United States is and how, to avert a broader depression, U.S. policy makers must coordinate their response with officials in places like London, Beijing, Singapore and Tokyo. During the Asian financial crisis of 1997, American leaders were able to comfortably dish out prescriptions without worrying about America's own vulnerabilities. Not today: Fed chairman Ben Bernanke and Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson have needed international cooperation to stem the contagion.

All this suggests that the first step to fixing America's image problem will be for Washington to acknowledge that, despite its power, the United States is not invulnerable. If it's going to thrive in today's interconnected world, it needs new habits of cooperation based on a healthy respect for the interests of everyone else. Much of the world remains well disposed to the United States. But America needs to reciprocate this good will by listening carefully to voices from around the globe and trying to work with them. A little pragmatism in place of post-cold-war hubris will go a long way, enhancing U.S. security and creating a better world in the process.

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