The Incapacitation of US Statecraft and Diplomacy

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Summary
After the Second World War, the United States led the world in the reform of global governance. It also articulated and implemented a grand strategy to cope with the bipolar order that the war had brought into being. Confronted at present with a comparable crisis in global governance amid massive shifts in the global distribution of wealth and power, the United States has yet to articulate a vision, lead reform efforts, or reformulate its global strategy. This lapse from leadership reflects changes in the US political system that reinforce a militarized approach to foreign policy and make it difficult, if not impossible, for the United States to formulate strategic initiatives or to implement them through diplomacy and other measures short of war.

Keywords
statecraft, diplomacy, strategy, United States, militarism, global governance, Cold War, interest groups, domestic politics, terrorism

Introduction
The United States has long been the wealthiest and among the most assertive of the world’s great powers.1 Over the century since the First World War, the United States’ wealth — combined with the global appeal of its constitutional democracy and its unparalleled capacity to project military power to the most distant corners of the world — made it the central actor in defining a succession of ‘world orders’. The challenge to play this role is once again before the United States.

After the Second World War, the United States famously exemplified enlightened internationalism. In consultation with Europeans, Americans led the way in the creation of successful new institutions, programmes and rules of international

1) By 1890, the United States’ economic output had grown to roughly twice those of the contemporary United Kingdom, Germany, Russia, China or India (the globally dominant economies of previous decades and centuries). The late 1880s and early 1890s marked a new international assertiveness by the United States, including threats to go to war with Germany over Samoa, with Chile over the treatment of US citizens, and with Britain over its territorial disputes with Venezuela. In 1893, the United States overthrew the Hawaiian monarchy as a prelude to formal annexation of the Hawaiian Islands in 1900. In 1898, it went to war with Spain and joined the ranks of colonial powers.
behaviour. The result was an ‘American half century’ — Pax Americana in the space beyond the Soviet orbit. But the United States’ diplomatic response to the challenge to lead global change has often fallen short. The current situation is a case in point, involving multiple failures of global governance amid rapid shifts in economic and political power.

In the post-Cold War era, the United States has yet to outline any principles, articulate any vision, or formulate any strategy for the reform of international institutions and practices, fiscal and monetary adjustments, or military retrenchment. So far, the United States has cast itself as the military defender of vested interests in a crumbling status quo rather than as the crafter of a new strategic order or a more effective international system. Why is this so? What might stimulate US strategic repositioning and leadership of the global response to change? What would it take to restore such leadership?

Existential Threats and Other Challenges before the United States

The universally recognized prowess of the United States’ armed forces now contrasts with the widely acknowledged inefficacy of US strategy and the perceived inadequacies of the United States’ diplomatic and other civilian capabilities in foreign affairs. The disparity in military versus civilian capabilities demonstrably skews US foreign policy towards military responses to international events. Most of the challenges before the United States, however, are not amenable to military solutions.

The risks entailed in failing to meet these challenges are not trivial. At least one is almost existential. A dollar-based global monetary system that is long past its prime and overdue for correction cannot much longer sustain the spendthrift fiscal policies to which Americans have become accustomed. The inevitable adjustment to fiscal and monetary realities could include not just global financial collapse but the sudden decline of both US prosperity and the worldwide military

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2) The First World War marked a collapse in the pre-existing global order that brought forth a US vision of a reformed international system. This proved stillborn, as lofty talk of transatlantic cooperation yielded to mean-spirited nationalism and isolationism. The end of the Cold War era was followed by complacent assumptions of US supremacy that often substituted browbeating for diplomatic engagement and piece-meal intervention in failed states for visionary shaping of the geopolitical landscape. The result was strategic drift amid reduced US influence abroad. The terrorist assault of 11 September 2001 gave birth to a militaristic US unilateralism that scoffed at diplomacy and international law while eroding constitutional liberties at home. This accelerated the decline in the United States’ international prestige and appeal.

3) The roughly US$ 2.4 trillion in government benefits that are paid annually to individual Americans slightly exceeds the entire tax revenue of the federal government (which was estimated at about US$ 2.2 trillion in 2010). Such transfer payments constitute a little less than two-thirds of federal outlays. The remaining one-third of the federal budget (approximately US$ 1.3 trillion) is borrowed. In effect, all federal government operations other than payments to individuals (including defence, foreign affairs, homeland security and everything else) now depend on borrowing. This debt is ‘pyramiding’. As of mid-2011, there is no plan that addresses how it might be reduced; still less how it may be repaid.