

The Security Trap

Bush's foreign policy is failing, and it's not just because of Bush. It's because the world has fundamentally changed—a reality progressives must face.

The United States is the most powerful state in world history—unrivaled in its military, economic, technological, and geopolitical capabilities. Yet America's authority, measured in terms of credibility, respect, and the ready cooperation of governments around the world, has declined sharply in recent years. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the world seemed to be going in America's direction. America's vision of international aspirations was remarkably congruent with the rest of the world's, a vision symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the triumph of the ideals championed by the United States: liberal democracy, global markets, and multilateral governance. But today, America and the world are increasingly at odds. In a recent survey of Western European public opinion, the United States was rated as a greater threat to global stability than Iran or North Korea. The

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United States is positioned at the center of the global system—and its power is unrivaled—but its role as a global leader has never been more controversial, contested, or resisted.

This troubling situation will forever be associated with the Bush Administration, particularly its “war on terrorism” and the invasion of Iraq. President George W. Bush’s foreign policy has been extraordinarily unpopular around the world, and he himself has few admirers outside the United States. “The world hates George Bush more than any U.S. president in my lifetime,” columnist Thomas Friedman observed recently.

But is it really that simple? Are liberals and other Bush critics correct in saying that America’s eroded authority is essentially a product of Bush’s foreign policy? Will a new administration be able to wash away the ill will and eroded relations of the Bush years? Or is the crisis of America’s global position rooted in deeper problems?

Bush’s foreign policy is indeed failing, but it is important to come to grips with why it is failing. To be sure, it is not working because Bush led the country into an epic disaster in Iraq. But the problems are not just about policy incompetence, ideological blindness, or high-risk policy choices gone bad. Ultimately, Bush’s foreign policy is failing because it is inconsistent with the realities of a transforming international system, which shapes and limits the way the United States can effectively exercise power and, more importantly, assert its authority. These deeper dilemmas and dangers that beset America’s global position would face any president, and they must be confronted if we are to find a coherent, enlightened, and sustainable post-Bush foreign policy.

Put simply, the geopolitical terrain upon which America’s leadership position rests is shifting. The rise of American unipolar power and the erosion of norms of state sovereignty have “flipped” the Westphalian order on its head, altered the logic of order and rule, and made American power more controversial and contested. It has also made it more difficult for the United States to assert its leadership on the global stage. Because of this, the Bush Administration has run into trouble—or as I would put it, the United States has gotten caught in a “security trap.” When America tries to solve the nation’s security problems by exercising its power or using force, it tends to produce resistance and backlash that leaves the country bereft of authority, isolated, and ultimately more insecure than it was before it acted.

This can be seen clearly in the record of the Bush Administration. But the thornier problem is that, when liberals take over the reins of foreign policy, they too will fall into this security trap unless they understand the problem and devise a foreign policy that works with, rather than against, these evolving global

realities. For Bush and some Democrats, being the unchecked superpower means that the United States has the freedom to act alone or in whatever coalitions it sees fit. But, ironically, the opposite is true. Unfettered power creates resentment and opposition, which makes it more difficult for America to act. To turn power into authority, the United States needs to find ways to restrain and reconnect its extraordinary unipolar power to institutions and partnerships that make up the international community.

Accordingly, the next administration—Democratic or Republican—needs to focus on rebuilding America’s authority as a global power. Threats and challenges abound around the world, but the United States will struggle in responding to any and all of them unless it renews its political capital in the currency of the new international realm. Call it a renewal agenda, one that has at its core a set of proposals for rebuilding global institutions and partnerships tied to new political bargains between the United States and other major states. Ultimately, the key to rebuilding America’s authority is its commitment to sponsoring and operating within a newly reformed, rules-based international order.

Transformations in Global Power

The Bush Administration fell into the security trap because it does not fully understand the implications of the two most important transformations in world politics in half a century: the rise of unipolar power and changing norms of sovereignty. Unipolarity happened almost without notice during the 1990s. The United States began the decade as the world’s only superpower, and it had a better decade than the other major states. It grew faster than an inward-looking Europe, while Japan stagnated and Russia collapsed. China has grown rapidly in recent years, but it remains a developing country. America’s expenditures on defense are equal to almost half of global defense spending. Interestingly, the United States did not fight a great power war to become the unipolar state or overturn the old international order. It simply grew more powerful while other states sputtered or failed. This peaceful ascent to unipolarity probably has made the transition less destabilizing and less threatening to other nations.

Nevertheless, the rise of unipolarity is fraught with implications for American foreign policy. On the one hand, the fact that the United States is the only superpower gives it unprecedented options and opportunities. It can say no to other states and go it alone more readily than in the past. But it is also the case that other states find it easier to “free ride” on American policy than in the past, which opens up new disputes between the United States and its partners about

the provision of global public goods: security, open markets, and frameworks for cooperation. Is the United States providing a public good when it stations troops around the world and confronts security threats in Asia and the Middle East? Washington thinks it is—and so it wants and expects the cooperation of others. But other countries are not sure they are beneficiaries of American security protection, and even if they are, they have incentives to let the United States handle these threats on its own. In other instances, countries around the world expect the United States to be a public goods provider—for example, leading the way in global environmental protection or settling regional Middle Eastern disputes—but Washington officials do not necessarily see this as America’s responsibility. This bundle of contradictory incentives and calculations makes unipolarity ripe for conflict and misunderstandings, even among longtime allies.

However, there is another implication in the rise of unipolarity that is subtler but utterly critical: a shift in the underlying logic of order and rule in world politics. In a bipolar or multipolar system, powerful states “rule” in the process of leading coalitions of states in balancing against other states (which likewise usually have their own coalitions). When the system shifts to unipolarity, this logic of rule disappears. Power is no longer based on balancing and equilibrium, but on the predominance of one state. This is new and potentially threatening to weaker states (whether they are friendly to the new hegemon or not). As a result, the power of the leading state is thrown into the full light of day. Unipolar power itself becomes a “problem” in world politics. As Yale history Professor John Gaddis argues, American power during the Cold War was accepted by other states because there was “something worse” over the horizon. With the rise of unipolarity, that “something worse” disappears.

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The recent erosion of norms of state sovereignty exacerbates this problem. The gradual decline of Westphalian sovereignty is rightly seen as the triumph of the postwar human rights revolution. The implication is that the “international community” increasingly has legitimate interests in what goes on within a country’s own borders. Over the decades, the international community has added more realms of internal state activity in which it has a stake; most recently, the new threat of transnational terrorism has opened up states even more to outside scrutiny. As former State Department Policy Planning Director Richard Haass notes, “Sovereignty is being challenged from both within and without. Weak states struggle to exercise legitimate authority within their

territories. Globalization makes it harder for all nations to control their frontiers. Governments trade freedom of action for the benefits of multilateral cooperation. And outlaw regimes jeopardize their sovereign status by pursuing reckless policies fraught with danger for their citizens and the international community." As a result, Haass argues, there is "an emerging global consensus that sovereignty is not a blank check."

This transformation has had two implications. First, the erosion of norms of sovereignty has created a new "license" for powerful states to intervene in the domestic affairs of weak and troubled states. In effect, the norms of state sovereignty have less "stopping power." There are fewer principled and normative inhibitions on intervention. Second, eroded sovereignty has not been matched by a rise of new norms and agreements about when and how the "international community" should intervene. After all, who speaks for the international community? This vacuum in which old norms have weakened but new norms have not fully emerged has ushered in a new struggle over the sources of authority in the international community.

This global struggle over the sources of international authority has, in turn, been intensified by the rise of American unipolarity. After all, only the United States has the military power to systematically engage in large-scale uses of force around the world. Indeed, the two developments reinforce worldwide insecurity about American power: The United States is the only global political-military power, and the revolutions in human rights and transnational terrorism call forth new reasons why intervention—in the name of the international community or global security or hegemonic management—may be necessary.

The Democratization Paradox

Two other shifts in the global system help create this "problem" of American power. The end of the Cold War has eliminated a common threat that tied the United States to a global array of allies, and it has meant that the United States does not need these allies in the same way as in the past. But it also means that other states do not need the United States as much, either. As a result, American power is less clearly tied to a common purpose. This makes American power less intrinsically legitimate and desirable in the eyes of states and peoples around the world.

The other long-term shift is the rise of an international democratic community, with more countries being led by constitutional, popularly elected governments. This democratic community has paradoxically affected U.S. foreign policy. On the one hand, it gives the United States ready access to partners and the ability to pursue complex forms of cooperation. American power itself is seen as more

benign and accessible to other democracies, because the United States is a democracy. On the other hand, these democratic states are not likely to respond to domination or coercion by the United States. Indeed, they will expect America to operate within rules and institutions of the democratic community.

Yet nineteenth-century statecraft is ill-suited for a twenty-first-century democratic world order. The British diplomat and European Union official Robert Cooper has captured the implications of this global democratic transition: “The realist world of rational policy making, equilibrium, alliances of convenience, and the balance of power, worked best when we were governed by rational, oligarchs—Richelieu, Pitt, Palmerston or Bismarck. Democratic ideas mean that policy requires a moral basis.... The balance of power, which calls for the application of power with calculation and restraint, is no longer sustainable in a democratic age. Nor is the exercise of hegemony by force.”

In such a world, it is not just poor diplomacy or war-planning on Bush’s part that has hurt America’s standing in the world. Rather, his administration has discovered the limits of American power in the age of democracy. It has gotten into trouble—losing credibility, prestige, respect, and political support—when it has been seen as side-stepping or disrespecting the rules and norms of the liberal order. When America tries to solve security problems by exercising power and wielding force, it triggers resistance and hostility that ultimately makes it harder for the United States to achieve its original security goals. The Bush Administration, then, walked right into this security trap and made it worse. The changing structural foundations of world politics have put American power on display. The Bush Administration added alarms and flashing lights.

Bush and the Security Trap

Three aspects of the new Bush national security orientation have exacerbated America’s limitations as presented by the security trap. First is the Bush Administration’s wholesale depreciation of multilateral governance and cooperative security that is manifest in the long list of agreements and treaties that it resisted in its first years. It famously un-signed America from the International Criminal Court. The United States was also the lone holdout as 178 countries agreed to implement the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. The Administration rejected or withdrew from an entire array of arms control treaties—the 1995 Biological Weapons Convention, the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). And the Administration has not only refused to participate in new international agreements, but it has failed to live up to obligations under existing treaties,

such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Some of this resistance to security agreements began during the Clinton Administration, with its refusal to sign the Treaty Banning Anti-Personnel Mines and the Senate's rejection of the CTBT. But the Bush Administration proudly made it a major feature of its foreign policy.

In effect, the Bush Administration has disconnected American foreign policy and national security from the array of global political, economic, and political institutions that have been used in the postwar era as tools to advance the country's global position and national interests. Bush has brought into his political coalition policy officials who question the basic premises of America's long-standing approach to alliances, multilateral governance, and liberal international order—and it shows.

As a result of their disregard of global rules and security regimes, the very foundations of order and cooperation built up over the decades are thrown into doubt. The postwar system of rules and institutions has provided functional benefits for states around the world: providing mechanisms for communication, channeling conflict, and establishing rights and commitments. Moreover, this postwar system has been championed by the United States and is integral to the way the it has asserted its hegemonic leadership in the postwar era. So when the United States steps back from this support for rules and institutions, the basic character of international order is undermined—and states start to worry and assess their options.

It might be useful to think of this dynamic this way: The United States is unique in that it is simultaneously both the provider of “global governance” and a great power that pursues its own national interest. America's hegemonic leadership role is manifest when it champions the World Trade Organization (WTO), engages in international rule or regime creation, or reaffirms its commitment to cooperative security in Asia and Europe. Its great power role is manifest, for example, when it seeks to protect its domestic steel or textile industry. When it acts as an enlightened hegemon, it is seeking to lead or manage the global system of rules and institutions; when it is acting as a nationalist great power, it is seeking to respond to domestic interests and its relative power position. The Bush Administration has pulled back from its hegemonic leadership role (enlightened or otherwise) and, at least from the perspective of other states, appears to be attempting to run the global system as a more traditional, nationalist great power. Resistance and backlash inevitably follow.

The second destabilizing aspect of Bush's security doctrine is its emphasis on national security through regime change—the idea that certain types of

states, simply by their nature, cannot be trusted, and only by turning them into rule-obeying democracies can America become secure. The old treaty-based, arms-control and nonproliferation approach to international security sought to put strictures on the actions of states. In the Bush approach, states themselves must be overturned and transformed.

In effect, the United States presents itself to the world as a “revisionist” power. It seeks to overturn and transform, and it does so for reasons that are tied directly to its security. Columbia University political scientist Robert Jervis captures this new logic: “[A]s long as many countries are undemocratic, democracies elsewhere, including the United States, cannot be secure. President Woodrow Wilson wanted to make the world safe for democracy. Bush extends and reverses this, arguing that only in a world of democracies can the United States be safe.” The invidious nature of the Bush doctrine erodes the entire project of tying global security to a system of universal rules, treaties, compromises, and bargains.

The third aspect of the Bush strategic vision that exacerbates America’s security trap is the exemptions and special status that America claims for itself. Bush sees a world in which a unipolar America enforces order and provides security as a public good that the world should welcome. Recall Bush’s 2002 West Point speech, in which he warned other great powers that the United States would not tolerate a “peer competitor”—and he argued that in doing so, the United States was doing everyone around the world a favor. Leave the “driving” to America and the world can remain peaceful and prosperous. The dangers and competitive costs of great power rivalry are put to an end. But, in return for this American-provided “public good,” the rest of the world will need to tolerate American departures from adherence to universal rule-based order. The International Criminal Court is a perfect example: The United States claims that it cannot play by the same rules as other states because of its unique global security involvements, which make it a special target for political prosecutions. This line of unipolar reasoning leads to what Harvard’s John Ruggie has called American “exemptionalism.”

The problem is that other states do not really buy this argument. Either they do not quite buy the American claim that it is providing a public good for the world, or they do not think the public good is worth the price of expanded American exemptionalism. The result is disagreement, contested authority, lost

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cooperation, and reduced American capacity to realize its security goals. Again, the United States is caught in the security trap.

Escaping the Security Trap

The combination of a shifting global landscape—manifest in the erosion of the Westphalian order—and the post-September 11 national security strategy of the Bush Administration has caught the United States in a security trap that creates an increasingly inhospitable environment for American interests. Unipolarity and eroded sovereignty give the United States capacities and a warrant to project power across the world, even as it poses American power as a “problem” for the rest of the global community. At the same time, the Bush Administration’s resistance to international rules and institutions, the doctrine of regime change, and exemptionalism exacerbate worries about American power. Together, this creates an extraordinary situation: The most powerful state in the world is not a keeper of the status quo but a revisionist hegemon. The United States has the capacity to dominate, but not the legitimacy to rule; it has power, but not authority.

To escape this security trap in the coming years, the United States will need to find ways to reassure other states and bind itself to the wider international community. If American power is to regain its lost authority, it will need to be reinserted into a reformed system of agreed-upon global rules and institutions. First, the United States needs to send an unmistakable signal to the rest of the world that it is again committing itself to promoting and operating within a rule-based international order. This was, after all, what the United States did after World War II, when it emerged as the preeminent global power and found itself in a position to shape the postwar global order. Truman and his colleagues created a far-flung liberal multilateral order and a Cold War alliance system that fused American power to institutions and liberal purpose. The restraint on American power and the projection of American power went hand in hand.

A rule-based international order does circumscribe the way power is exercised—and it would, to some extent, reduce America’s autonomy and freedom of action. But in return, the United States buys itself a more predictable and legitimate international order. By getting other states to operate within a set of multilateral rules and institutions, the United States reduces its need to continuously pressure and coerce other states to follow America’s lead. When the United States makes itself a global rule-maker, other states become less concerned with resisting American power and more concerned with negotiating the framework of cooperation. Today, American unipolarity is associated with

the erosion of a global system of rules and institutions. This association is not inevitable. As it did in the 1940s, the United States can turn itself into a rule-producer, and its authority will increase accordingly.

Second, the United States needs to look for ways to make decisions on the use of force within wider collective bodies, particularly the United Nations and NATO. America's near-monopoly on the use of force is a worry felt around the world. To the extent that this military power is channeled through widely respected multilateral bodies, the more likely the resulting uses of force will be seen as legitimate. Ideally, the United States should try to gain U.N. Security Council approval for its use-of-force decisions, gaining the legitimacy that flows from this global venue. But practical political constraints on getting the United Nations to make supportive and timely decisions gives the United States incentives to look for collective approval from other bodies.

Among the alternatives, NATO, which embodies the security interests and capabilities of the major Western democracies, is the most promising. In committing itself to making strategic military decisions within NATO, the

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United States would be making a basic bargain with its European partners. The United States opens itself up in various ways to the views of other states and in return it gets their cooperation and the legitimacy that follows. The United States gives up some policy autonomy but gets the benefits of other states contributing to the campaign. As a formal organization, NATO provides the mechanisms to engage in strategic planning and aggregate military capacities. As an informal mechanism, NATO provides a venue for consultation. Washington, in effect, says to others: Our door is open, please come in and make your case. In the end, the United States will decide on its own and do what it wants. But it creates a political process where other states get involved in trans-governmental pulling and hauling—and they are given at least the opportunity to influence American policy.

In binding itself to other states, the United States makes the exercise of unipolarity more acceptable to the outside world. Acknowledging this logic, The Carnegie Endowment's Robert Kagan has argued that to regain its lost legitimacy, the United States needs to return to its postwar bargain: allowing some European voice over U.S. policy in exchange for their support. The United States, Kagan points out, "should try to fulfill its part of the transatlantic bargain by granting European some influence over the exercise of its power—provided

that, in return, Europeans wield that influence wisely.” This is the logic that informed U.S. security cooperation with its European and East Asian partners during the Cold War. It is a logic that can be renewed today to help make unipolarity more acceptable.

Third, the United States needs to articulate a substantive and expansive vision of the international order. The Bush Administration has offered a very limited and narrow conception of what it sees as the desirable system of international relations. The focus is on America’s dominant role in using force to confront terrorists and despotic states. It is a vision of order that emphasizes American military preeminence, coalitions of the willing, and the war on terrorism. This is not a vision of order that will elicit the cooperation and normative approbation of other countries.

What is missing in the Bush conception is the embrace of a notion of an international order that embodies and advances common global interests and values. In the 1940s, American leaders connected American power to the building of a liberal international order. This liberal vision of order has several components. One is a commitment to free trade and open markets, creating the conditions for growth and development. Another is a commitment to the social bargain: Open markets create winners, but also losers, so countries within the open system need to develop social protections against economic distress. If the United States wants to see other states buy into this open world economy, it needs to help and support those countries to establish the sorts of Western social support structures that allow for stable democracy to co-exist with trade and investment.

Another aspect of the liberal vision of international order is a commitment to the creation of permanent governance institutions. These governance mechanisms facilitate ongoing streams of cooperation needed to manage growing realms of complex interdependence. This is America’s commitment to building and operating within a rule-based order. The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the WTO are all embodiments of this managed system of economic openness. The liberal vision also entails a commitment to cooperative security. This is a vision of order where the United States ties its security to other states through security alliances. These postwar alliances—NATO and the U.S.-Japan pact—have been about more than simply deterrence and containment of Soviet communism. The alliances have also provided an architecture for the political community that bridges Europe, North America, and East Asia. The alliances provide mechanisms for “doing business” across the Atlantic and Pacific. They keep the United States engaged in Europe and Asia—and they allow leaders in these regions to be engaged and connected to America. Finally,

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the specific dimensions of the liberal international order are less important than the general message the United States needs to send to the world: It is not just concerned with attacking terrorism and promoting freedom, but also with helping to bring forth and lead a liberal international order in which countries, both weak and strong, can flourish.

In a sense, the security trap is an ironic problem. After all, the structural sources of this problem follow from the fabulous postwar success of the United States and its disproportionate and unbalanced material capabilities in relation to other states. Yet, the United States has an extraordinary opportunity today, as it has in the past, to use its power to shape the international order. In the Bush vision, international order arises exclusively from U.S. unipolar preeminence, with America wielding its unchecked power to keep others in line and enforce international hierarchy. In the liberal vision, international order arises from the coupling of America's preeminence with its founding principles and the United States wielding its power to craft consensual and legitimate mechanisms of international governance. With this vision and a new approach to how to exercise American force and influence, America can rebuild and reassert its authority on the global stage—and pick the lock of the security trap. **■**