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# **US GLOBAL LEADERSHIP DILEMMA AS A CHALLENGE FOR THE US-RUSSIA RELATIONS**

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## **US GLOBAL LEADERSHIP DILEMMA AS A CHALLENGE FOR THE US-RUSSIA RELATIONS**

The paper discusses the issue of leadership as a central problems of the US Grand Strategy as America is adjusting to a transforming international system, marked by increasing multipolarity, interdependence and heterogeneity, and decreasing governability. It also tackles the US commitment to global leadership as one of central problems of the US-Russia relations, especially at a time when Moscow's foreign policy is increasingly marked with the concept and ideology of multipolarity and, consequently, equality in relations with the USA. The paper also addresses key components of Obama Administration Grand Strategy, such as renewing or establishing strategic partnerships with the old and new power centers in the world, and the "pivot" to Asia, and provides detailed illustration of the theoretical theses made by examples from the US-Russia relations. Finally, the paper suggests some counters for transformation of the US leadership, in order to make it more compatible with the evolution of the international system and benign for the US relations with Russia.

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## **Leadership as the central problem of the US Foreign Policy**

The central challenge that the US faces today is that in less than 20 years since the US declared victory in the Cold War, became the only superpower and quickly assumed the role of a center of the unipolar world, a global leader and manager of its own international system with a global reach, a global sheriff and bearer of values that seemed universal, it faced a sudden and comprehensive economic, foreign policy and political crisis.<sup>2</sup> The magnitude and shock of this crisis, which is still to be realized and comprehended, is no less dramatic, than the history of the US rise itself, which in 200 years turned itself from a colony to the only superpower and center of a unipolar world.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the US history is a history of unprecedented success, expansion and dynamism. Moreover, until now it seemed as if the historic development itself was “proving” the basic American ideological assumptions: that it is an exceptional nation with universal values, which is destined to lead the world to a universal democratic peace. But as soon as the US reached the apex and, it appeared as if a key and decisive moment has come for the US to fulfill its historic mission – transform the international system in accordance with the US interests and values – something went wrong.<sup>4</sup>

In the economy, the US, still being the biggest nation-state economy in the world, most diversified and traditionally dynamic and technologically advanced among the developed economies, still the founder and most influential player of the global economic governance institutions, became the center of the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression. The major pillar of the world economic order has become its major problem. The role the US plays in global economic and financial governance is increasingly at odds with the volume of its foreign debt and to American monetary policies (printing more dollars). It takes a much longer time than it used to be for the US to resume growth after crisis (and the ways out of the current “Great Recession” are unclear). Unemployment is high (for US standards) and not reducing. Finally, for the 1<sup>st</sup> time in a century the US is losing an image of the most vibrant, dynamic economy and foundation of the world’s economic growth to China.<sup>5</sup> China, India, other “new rising centers” and Asia as a whole are perceived today as the “last hope” of the world economy, not the US. While trust in the US economic dynamism and progress has been one of the major foundations of American soft and hard power. Symbolic (in terms of determining perceptions of the vector, which is of utmost importance in today world) is a comparison between the booming Shanghai with the aging infrastructure in the US.

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<sup>2</sup> Brzezinski, Z. *Second Chance: Three Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower*. New York: Basic Books. 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Dumbrell, John. *American Power: Crisis or Renewal?* Politics, 2010. No. 30, SI, 1, pp: 15-23

<sup>4</sup> Robert Kagan. *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*. Knopf, 2008, 128 pages.

<sup>5</sup> Beckley, M. 'China's Century?', *International Security*, 2011, 36, 3, pp. 41-78

Politically, the US is facing unprecedented in recent decades and self-destructing polarization between Democrats and Republicans, which can hardly find anything to agree upon in both domestic and foreign policies, and their mutual diminishing popularity and loss of appeal – witness the Tea Party movement. Both Parties, and especially the Republicans, are undergoing dangerous transformation, with the traditional center depleting and the center of gravity going to the flanks, which aggravates polarization. This means that for the next years the US political system will remain to be paralyzed, and thus reducing effectiveness of the US domestic and foreign policies, reducing a US capacity to act as a responsible and a reliable partner.

In foreign and national security policy the US faces a crisis of leadership and military overextension.<sup>6</sup> It turned out that indispensable of all its power preponderance and global presence, its diplomatic, military, economic, ideological, cultural and other instruments and assets, it is incapable of directing development of the international system in a way favorable for the US, incapable of transforming the world as it wishes. Despite the fact that the US is still the most powerful nation on Earth – militarily, diplomatically and economically, despite its efforts to consolidate unipolarity and global leadership under Bill Clinton and George W. Bush and renew its global leadership under Barack Obama, despite its efforts to transform the international system in accordance with the US interests and values, the world is clearly developing in a way unfavorable for the United States.<sup>7</sup> And quite notably, that it started developing that way after the US acquired a hegemonic positions in the world.

- The US has failed to preserve itself as an undisputed pole of a unipolar system. The “unipolar moment” was indeed a moment, while “unipolar stability” turned out to be a fake in the global context.
- The US has failed to achieve the macro- and micro tasks in the sphere of global security it was claiming to deal with during the last 2 decades. Afghanistan and Iraq, democratization and modernization of the Broader Middle East, Arab-Israeli conflict, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, international terrorism, etc. – in all or majority of cases the situation is worse than before the American “management”. There are reasons to say that Libya and Syria will follow these examples.
- Power is shifting from the West, including the US, to the rising centers, especially in Asia, and also diffusing more broadly among multiple actors.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is increasingly difficult for the US to consolidate and organize others to fulfill an American agenda: these others

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<sup>6</sup> G. John Ikenberry. *America's Imperial Ambition*. *Foreign Affairs*, 2002. Vol. 81, No. 5. P. 44-60.

<sup>7</sup> Zakaria, Fareed, *The post-American world and the rise of the rest*. London: Penguin, 2009

<sup>8</sup> Fareed Zakaria. *The Future of American Power: How America and Survive the Rise of the Rest* // *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008.

are more and more either unwilling or demand a bigger price for their cooperation. The examples of Syria, Iran, North Korea, Middle Eastern conflict, US-Chinese relations, global climate change, nuclear reduction agenda, etc. vividly depict that the capacity of the US to determine and drive events, both multilaterally and unilaterally, has reduced.

- As the power of the “new centers” rise, while the US relative and even absolute (decreasing defense budget and Armed Forces personnel, unwillingness of the Americans to fight new wars, economic troubles, deficit) power decreases, the US needs these new power centers to fulfill its agenda and pursue – sometimes vital - national interests. However, unless there is a convergence of interests, which is far from being the rule, these centers are unwilling to cooperate.
- Due to the diffusion of power the correlation of interests between the US and its allies and partners is becoming more complicated and non-linear. On some cases they can be strong supporters of the US policy, while on the other, sometimes no less important ones for the US, they create difficulties. Turkish policies on Syria on the one hand, and on Iran and Iraq, on the other hand, is a bright example of this complexity. This puts additional limits on American leadership.
- The world is again becoming pluralistic and heterogeneous in terms of values. Universality of the American values is again under fire, which undermines the US basic ideological beliefs and world perceptions.<sup>9</sup>
- The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan showed that the capacity of the US military power to fulfill the necessary political targets – promoting democratization and overall reform of the international system through forceful regime change from the outside - was limited, and that the US is incapable to pursue an imperial foreign policy in the current conditions – just as all the other great powers. Besides these wars guarantee that the US will not return to an imperial practice in the observable future – which is already stipulated on the official level in Obama Administration’s Strategic Defense Guidance in 2012 (rejection of long-term occupation).<sup>10</sup> This significantly reduces the transformative component in the US Grand Strategy as such, making it to do more with the US “conventional” national interests, rather than with transformation of the international system, especially with the help of the military force.

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph S. Nye. The Decline of American Soft Power // Foreign Affairs, Vol. 83, No 3, May/ June 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Strategic Defense Guidance “Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Defense”. US Department of Defense, January 2012. [http://www.defense.gov/news/defense\\_strategic\\_guidance.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/news/defense_strategic_guidance.pdf)

- Moreover, these wars have exhausted the US military, decreased American physical capability and moral will to engage in new wars (witness the Obama Administration's approach on Libya, Syria and Iran), and contributed to a situation, when the US was compelled to start reducing its defense budget and reviewing its global defense role and responsibility. The latter is illustrated in the 2012 Strategic Defense Guidance and the 2011 "National Strategic Narrative" paper by "Mr. Y".<sup>11</sup> This contrasts with dynamic increase of the new poles' defense budgets, including China, Russia and India. For the 1<sup>st</sup> time since the end of the Cold War the gap in military expenditures between the US and the non-Western power centers started to shrink. It is still enormous, but dynamic and vector matter.

This all makes the future of the American global leadership in the increasingly multipolar and even polycentric world the central problem of the US foreign policy for the years to come.<sup>12</sup> The major challenge that the US faces is how to adapt itself to the new international conditions, what kind of *modus operandi* to employ, to preserve the US primacy and leadership and reverse the tendency of the international environment becoming less favorable for the US. This adaptation was – and still is – at the core of the Obama's Grand Strategy. Another answer to the same question is provided by the Republicans.

## Leadership and multipolarity

However, this reading of the challenge and fundamental task of the US foreign policy in a way as it is formulated by the Obama Administration – renewing American leadership<sup>13</sup> – highlights the central philosophical problem of the US foreign policy and foreign policy thinking. The one which is the major obstacle for the US to offer a successful strategy and overcome the current foreign policy crisis. It is the very clinging of the US, of the overwhelming majority of its foreign policy establishment and foreign policy community, to the idea of global leadership as such. Indeed, all the discussions and disputes inside the US, indispensable of whether they are official or academic, in the official Strategic papers or academic articles, concern the methods of sustaining, consolidating or renewing of the US leadership. The current presidential campaign is no exclusion. These methods can be multilateral or unilateral, in accordance with the international law or not, putting emphasis on hard power or soft power, militaristic or diplomatic,

<sup>11</sup> A National Strategic Narrative. By Mr. Y. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011.

<http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/A%20National%20Strategic%20Narrative.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> See: Brooks, Stephen G. and William C. Wohlforth. World out of balance: international relations and the challenge of American primacy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008; Nye Joseph S., 'The future of American power: dominance and decline in perspective', Foreign Affairs 89: 6, Nov.Dec. 2010

<sup>13</sup> Barack Obama. Renewing American Leadership. // Foreign Affairs, Vol. 86, No. 4. July/August 2007. Pp. 2-16

focused on fighting transnational challenges or managing traditional risks and promoting conventional national interests, they can be liberal, neoconservative and even realist (as is Obama's "pivot" towards Asia). But the very notion of leadership, its necessity, desirability for the US and possibility under current international conditions is beyond discussion. Leadership, which primarily rests on primacy and agenda-setting plus an ability to raise the others to fulfill this agenda, is still the philosophy of the US participation in international affairs at such. This was openly stipulated in one of Barack Obama's State of the Union Addresses and reflected in the 2010 National Security Strategy.<sup>14</sup>

This is the major defect of the current US foreign policy discourse and thinking. This is indeed the same kind of defect, but on a more generalized level, that existed in the US discourse on what went wrong in Iraq. On that particular discourse the majority of the US foreign policy community, at least liberal internationalists and realists, came to a shared correct answer: it was wrong to go to Iraq. As for the US global leadership issue, only several realists among the academia and neo-isolationists provide the similar kind of answer. Both are marginal, and in the policy world such statement of question is anathema. On the contrary, a different kind of consensus has emerged among the majority of the US foreign policy community: that the only alternative to the US leadership will be a total chaos, and thus a "Post-American World" will be in fact a "New Middle Ages".<sup>15</sup>

Even if the latter is at least partly true, and a world with a US-led international order smaller in scope and depth would be indeed more dangerous and prone to conflicts than it is today, sustaining global leadership, that is, providing the universal agenda for action and making the other join in implementing this agenda, in conditions of multipolarity is simply impossible. With the re-distribution and diffusion of power the other players start having their own agendas and value their strategic independence, as Russia, China and India do. Even if they don't have an agenda of their own on this or that matter, there are not so much reasons why they would be eager to join a US agenda, especially if they have troubles with the US on the other issues, that they regard more important for them.

Indeed, the US leadership is being challenged by an ever growing number of actors. First, it is rejected by the new power centers, which instead of American leadership demand equal partnership in relations with the US. That is – elaboration of a joint agenda on an equal basis. Second, it is questioned even by some of the US allies and partners, who on many cases start

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<sup>14</sup> National Security Strategy. The White House, May 2010.

[http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Ikenberry, G. John, 'The rise of China and the future of the West: can the liberal system survive?' *Foreign Affairs* 87: 1, Jan.Feb. 2008, pp. 23–37; Clark, I. Bringing hegemony back in: the United States and international order. *International Affairs*, 2009. No. 85: 23–36

pursuing foreign policies contrary to the US preferences – even if they closely cooperate with the US on the American agenda on other issues. An example is Turkey, which works with the US on Syria, but openly challenges US policies and interests in relation to Iran and Iraq.

Thus, the continuous US refusal to discuss the problem of leadership as it is, instead of the methods of its preservation, will prolong, not overcome, the US foreign policy crisis, ultimately resulting in a continuous weakening of the US global stance. The reason is that all the possible methods of sustaining the US global leadership that the American foreign policy community could provide and is providing turn out to be unsuccessful in a multipolar world.

A vivid illustration of the current deadlock of the US foreign policy is that the Obama Administration's strategy of renewing American leadership, which is perhaps the most realistic and smartest given the domestic and international limitations, is already turning out to be unsuccessful.

The probable failure of the Obama's strategy is a good litmus test.<sup>16</sup> This is a most advanced strategy in recognizing the realities of multilateralism and emphasizing a necessity of the US to adapt. Indeed, to adapt itself, rather than adapt the international system to its needs and preferences. Its point of departure was an open recognition of multipolarity and a thesis that the US is not all-mighty and need the others to pursue its national interests successfully. This is a sharp departure from the previous point of departure of the Bush and Clinton strategies, which was the US victory in the Cold War and emergence of a unipolar era.

To renew American leadership in the new multipolar context the Obama administration tried to establish or renew and strengthen partnerships with all the centers of power in the world, both democratic and non-democratic, Western and non-Western, allied with the US and not allied, and with the powerful and capable countries in general, making a particular emphasis on common interests, which, in their turn, rested on common and shared transnational globalization-driven threats and challenges. Focusing on them, rather than on traditional inter-national threats, was indeed, the only way to engage players with diverging national interests and unite them around a US-made agenda. This strategy is based on a liberal internationalist assumption that engaging a rising great power into a US-centric order resolves the challenge that this power could pose if remained independent, and strengthens the order and, ultimately, the American positions.

At the same time, the Obama administration exercised restraint of the use of force, emphasized multilateralism and tried to support its actions with maximum legality and legitimacy possible

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<sup>16</sup> Lindsay, J. M. (2011), George W. Bush, Barack Obama and the future of US global leadership. *International Affairs*, 87: 765–779



(witness the criteria that Obama Administration put on the terms of the US military participation in the war against Qaddafi forces in Libya). The US also strived to depict its will and capacity to produce global public goods (nuclear disarmament, fighting climate change, strengthening nuclear materials safety, etc.) and tried to make its foreign policy of multilateral agenda setting, focused on fighting transnational and global threats maximum attractable and appealing. Finally, to gain cooperation of the new non-democratic power centers on the matters important to the US, including on dealing with transnational threats, and engage them more broadly, the Obama Administration made certain indirect concessions to some of them, Russia in particular, and downplayed the role of democracy and human rights in the agenda of relations with them.

The US-Russia “reset” was the most vivid case of the Obama’s Administration new Grand Strategy, and during the 1<sup>st</sup> 2 years of the Administration it was the strategy’s the most evident success. Indeed, the “reset” was proposed by the Washington not because it wanted to improve relations with Moscow as an end in itself, but as a part and parcel of the general strategy of renewing American leadership. Obama Administration came to realize that Russia was necessary to promote some key US interests and implement some central elements of the Administration’s Grand Strategy.

First, partnership with Russia was desirable because Russia was one of the rising power centers, and the Strategy was based on building or renewing and strengthening these partnerships. Second, Russia was necessary for dealing with key US national security priorities – Afghanistan and Iran. Third, it was necessary for allowing the US to show its ability to produce global public goods and to emphasize attractiveness of American agenda. In particular, this concerns the new nuclear strategy proclaimed by Obama in April 2009 at Prague. Its implementation, including reductions in nuclear weapons, reviving arms control (weakened under Bush Administration) and strengthening nuclear materials safety required Russia. This is why, for instance, the New START was necessary.

Hence, to get Russian cooperation on these and other matters, the Obama Administration agreed to put embargo on even almost talk of NATO expansion on Ukraine and Georgia, not to mention the expansion itself; rolled down the scale and nature of the US national interests in Central Asia; substantially reduced the criticism of Russia on democracy and human rights issues (and even opposed congressional attempts to raise this issue on the priority list of the agenda of US-Russia relations); and supported Russian interests of joining the WTO and fostering technological innovation and modernization. All this allowed the sides to reach crucial success and raise by the year 2011 the relations on their best level since early 1990-s. for the 1<sup>st</sup> time the

US-Russia relations had a more or less solid foundation – mutual recognition that they need each other.

But already then – from the onset - the Obama’s Strategy got under immense fire from the Republicans. Its realism was condemned as betrayal of American interests and values. And the “reset” with Russia, as it was the most visible and by 2011 the only successful example of a new US policy of engaging the new rising power centers, suffered most.

Eventually, the Obama’s strategy collapsed (in its part of engaging great powers under the auspices of American leadership), as was its “reset” with Russia. Indeed, none of the rising powers, neither non-democratic China and Russia, nor democratic India and Brazil, moved closer to the US. On the contrary, by the end of Obama’s 1<sup>st</sup> term the US relations with China and Russia remain stain, while India and Brazil consolidate independent foreign policies. The US also failed to breathe new life into its alliance with Europe, and the comprehensive transatlantic rift in terms of priorities and military capabilities is increasing. Though, it was temporary compensated by the US-European cooperation on the Arab revolutions and Iran. The US Asia Pacific policy was more successful, and the US positions in the region are being strengthened. But it is done at the expense of relations with China, and the share of geopolitical confrontation between the two is evidently rising. While from the perspective of the US leadership it is vital to remember, that rejection of the policy of engaging China, and conduct of a containment policy only will be a strategy failure, not a strategy. Finally, on such issues as Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea and the Middle East Obama Administration is far from success.

In other words, the US managed to strengthen cooperation with Asian allies and new partners (Vietnam) on an anti-Chinese basis and with Europeans, some Arab allies and Turkey on Syria and the Arab spring as such. But this is by all means far from re-capturing global leadership. The US ability to drive events disregarding the opinion of those among the new rising powers who disagree is still reduced. The stalled efforts on Syria, Iran and climate change are a good illustration.

So why has Obama’s strategy of building strategic partnerships failed? As for the “reset” with Russia, it is partly due to domestic reasons. The Republicans in their attempts to weaken Obama tied the administration’s hands vs. Russia and prevented or downplayed many of cooperative actions the Administration was ready and willing to undertake. At the same time, they undermined Moscow’s trust in the US and will to invest in these relations, for it was clear for Russia that the current Administration does not represent the whole country, and if – or rather when – a republican administration comes, everything would explode. At the same time, the Russian leadership, especially with Putin’s comeback to the Presidency, made the US and

relations with the US a victim of its domestic policies of crushing the opposition and military, especially nuclear, build up. Moreover, it again started to pursue the US as a clear opponent of the current political regime in Russia and its interests abroad.

But there was a systemic reason as well. The US-Russia “reset” started to crumble soon after the US started to exert the leadership component of its strategy more explicitly. Indeed, the “reset” was about the US leadership from the onset, but as long as the interests of the sides converge, its impact on the bilateral relations was negligible. Whereas on diverging interests the leadership problem came on the surface. It manifested itself in the US persistence rejection of the Russian – and any other – agenda and insistence that only its own agenda, decisions and vision should be the basis for cooperation and collective action.

This was the case with the missile defense talks, when the Russian proposal was rejected at the onset, and the only possible term of cooperation was Russia joining the US project without any decision-making powers, while the project would remain unchanged. This was also the case with Libya, when the US used Russia (Medvedev’s decision to abstain at the UN SC on the 1973 resolution) to what turned out to be a US (plus European and Saudi), not a joint or truly multilateral agenda, and then effectively sidelined Moscow from decision-making over Libya when it was no longer needed and expressed disagreement with the US agenda of regime change. Finally, the same is with Syria, when Russia is again just invited to implementation of an American (as well as Saudi, Qatari, Turkish and European’s) decision that Assad should get out, while the opposition must capture power, and all the arguments in favor of a different approach are rejected and ignored.

The reasons why the US attempts to forge a “Strategic Partnership” with China and engage India and Brazil more deeply failed are of similar nature. The new powers, especially those who attribute high value to their strategic independence and demand an independent role in global and regional decision-making, are unwilling to join into implementation of American agenda if the US offers this agenda as a “complete product” and if they don’t have converging interests with the US on this particular matter.

Moreover, even if they do have converging interests, prioritization of these interests for the sides usually differs. What is important for the US, might be irrelevant or marginal for the new powers, and vice versa. This also reduces the chances of cooperation on the basis of American agenda. A country would hardly look forward to cooperate with the US on American agenda reflecting a secondary interest of this country, especially if the US itself poses a threat to its much more important interest. This is exactly the case of the US-Chinese and US-Russia relations. For Russia the issues of Ukraine, Central Asia and European security decision-making

are much more important than Iran or nuclear materials safety. For China the issue of Taiwan and South China Sea is far more important, than, let us say, global climate change.

Thus, to gain their cooperation on the spheres the US regards important, whereas the other find not, including on the transnational threats, which indeed are secondary for the new power centers, the US has to address their own priorities.<sup>17</sup> Which means, accepting their agenda. Just as was the case with the US-Russia “reset” in 2010. But when the US is unwilling or unable to do this, its leadership capabilities as regards engaging the new powers crumble. Indeed, despite the Obama Administration rhetoric, diplomacy in a multipolar world is based on linkages and “interests swaps”. They do not necessarily mean delimitating spheres of influence and deciding the others’ destiny above their heads. But this does mean accepting your partner’s agenda and addressing your partner’s interests if you want your agenda to be advanced and shared as well. Indispensable of what kind of challenges formulate this agenda – inter-national, national or transnational, for the states seldom do this differentiation, but rather include all of them in a list of challenges to their national security.

This already makes the US leadership selective, rather than all-encompassing. Indeed, accepting the other’s agenda is called equal partnership – exactly the format of relations the new powers desire, not a US leadership. It is even more so if the US has to adjust its original agenda to engage those it considers necessary for its implementation.

The problem is, however, that it is far not always when the US could allow itself such an adjustment or flexibility to accept the other’s agenda. Rather, opposite model is a rule. Especially in conditions of the current polarization of the US political system and Republican strong commitment to the idea of the US primacy and unchallenged leadership. Failing to compromise its indigenous position and agenda, the US does not receive the cooperation of the countries that are necessary for this agenda’s implementation. And hence, its leadership gets undermined.

As the Obama’s attempts to re-consolidate American leadership are bringing insufficient success, the alternative, currently offered by the neoconservative Republicans, who still dominate foreign policy arm of the Republican establishment, is even worse. It is far less appealing and going to be much more devastating in terms of the US global stance. This alternative is based on a premise that the US should not need to compromise its approach in any way in order to engage the others, including the new power centers, into implementing American agenda. But rather it should either compel them to bandwagon (though pressure, resolve,

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<sup>17</sup> Bruce Jones, Carlos Pascual and Stephen Stedman. *Power and Responsibility: Building International Order in an Era of Transnational Threats*. Brookings Institution, 2009. 360 p.

assertive rhetoric and muscular diplomacy) or ignore and act unilaterally, or at least together with like-minded countries. Which ignores the reality than neither is possible.

This alternative presumes another turn of the US to assertive, muscular, ideologically messianic, and most probably unilateral in terms of its implementation strategy, a sort of a “Bush lite” strategy, which will result in accelerating the process of the US relative decline. Indeed, the current neoconservative discourse on the US foreign policy, which still dominates in the Republican Party, tends to ignore the result and lessons of the Bush Presidency whatsoever and pretends as if we were still in the middle or end of the 1990-s. A relapse of messianic, assertive and maybe militaristic policy today would be more devastating for the US global stance than it was during last decade, when the US was at the apex of its might. It would quickly aggravate the relations between the US and the new power centers and make implementation of American interests even more difficult. Moreover, such a policy would again create strains between the US and majority of its allies.

Hence, the deadlock of the US foreign policy thinking and making is that no fundamentally new and different alternatives could be offered, if staying in the paradigm of renewing American leadership and sustaining primacy. Clinging to the latter, the US would be doomed to swing between “Obama-type” and “Bush lite-type” Global Strategies, the only result of which would be continuous decline and deepening foreign policy crisis – with different speeds and latitudes.<sup>18</sup> The decline would be slower under the “Obama-type” policy and quicker under “Bush type”. Indeed, these two exhaust the methods of achieving / sustaining global leadership that liberal internationalism (“Obama type policy”) and neoconservatism (“Bush type policy”) could offer. While realism is not about global leadership at all.

The fundamental mistake of both strategies is an assumption (quite natural given the US identity and historic experience) that the US leadership up until now ultimately depends on American behavior. Liberal internationalists assume that the world, at least the majority of countries, need and long for a benign and enlightened American leadership, and thus pursuing a multilateral and attractive policy, a policy of engagement of the powers that are still (and so far, according to this view) out of the US-led order, would help.<sup>19</sup> Neoconservatives, on their turn, insist that decisive assertion of American leadership, rather than attempts to “sell” it, would be more effective. Partly this is true, and indeed, the Bush Administration policies accelerated the US leadership decline, while Obama’s slowed it. But this is only partly. To a much bigger extent the fate of the

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<sup>18</sup> Quinn, A. The art of declining politely: Obama's prudent presidency and the waning of American power. *International Affairs*, 2011, 87: 803–824.

<sup>19</sup> G. John Ikenberry, Thomas J. Knock, etc. *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy. Wilsonianism in the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton University Press, 2009. 157 p.

US leadership depends on the processes the US can not control: global power shift and return of the International system to the norm of balance and multipolarity. The US can influence power shift, of course, as it can impact the rise of the new centers of power. But it can not reverse it.

What is possible – and desirable - in a multipolar world is equal partnership, implying joint elaboration of a joint agenda on an equal basis, or accepting each other's agendas on different issues. This excludes a situation, when a single country, even the most powerful one, has answers to all the questions, solutions to all problems, and when its vision is performed as universal and the only right. Equal partnership does not in any way reject or exclude the US leadership whatsoever. On the contrary, a US agenda setting and implementation of this agenda would be possible and desirable in many, even the majority of cases, as the US remains and will remain to be the most powerful nation of Earth and maintains central roles in many regions and processes. But this leadership will not be pervasive, but selective. It will be performed on an ad hoc bases, not as a rule, and will co-exist with leaderships of the other countries on some other issues.

## **Difficulties in parting with leadership**

Parting with leadership as a rule, rather than an ad hoc pattern, with a leadership as a paradigm of American participation in the International Affairs, and gradual acceptance of an equal or even subordinated role of some issues, will be extremely difficult. It will require time, and probably the US foreign policy will undergo several difficult zigzags before the US would reconcile with the new pattern of its involvement in world affairs, and this pattern will become a rule.

Indeed, being one among equals or even the 1<sup>st</sup> among equals contradicts to the US ideological identity, to history of the US foreign policy, to the fact of remaining American primacy and, finally, to the undeniable fact that there still exists a demand for a US leadership and active involvement on very many issues of the global and international agenda, and from many regions and countries.

First, too little time passed since the US assumed the role (or rather proclaimed itself) a global leader and global sheriff. It has just started to getting used to this, when it suddenly started crumbling. Psychologically this is very difficult to accept. Denial, as is the case with neocon Republicans, and perception as an unfortunate accident which needs to be corrected, as the liberal internationalists see it, are much more natural reactions.

Second, it contradicts to the US “I can” identity – an identity of a victorious and fantastically successful nation. Up to very recent times the US history was a history of unprecedented rise, optimism and expansion, and there were few problems in international affairs that the US could not solve. Of course, there were in the American history periods of “declinism”, when many in the US political establishment feared that they were surpassed by the Soviet Union or Japan, and time and again it turned out to be false. This is the argument that Republicans employ today – that the US is in another period of self-inflicted declinism, as it was at the end of the Carter Administration, and a new Reagan is needed to push the nation out of it. The problem is, however, that for the 1<sup>st</sup> time declinist worries seem to be right.

Third, acting as one of the poles of a multipolar system and joining agendas of the others contradicts the US self-perception as an exceptional nation, a shining city on the hill, which bears and pioneers universal values, and is destined to bring the world to an “end of history”. Which is – universal democracy. Given this self-perception it is absolutely natural for the US to see itself as a natural leader.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, the US exceptionalism makes it very hard for the US to join agendas of the others, especially if it contradicts the indigenous American perception or if this other is a non-democratic country. This is a part of a bigger problem, which roots are also in the US ideological identity and which is one of the strongest reasons for a US unilateralist tradition. It is a very special, nearly sacrosanct American attitude to its own sovereignty (as opposed to sovereignty of the others) and deep suspiciousness towards the international community, international law and the “world out there” in general. The latter, according to the US traditional perception, is comprised of tyrants, autocrats and “bad guys”, and thus lacks legitimacy and respect. To obey this world’s international law, which is, according to this view, a systems of deals among the tyrants, to be a part of this world’s international order and to join this world’s agenda means to compromise American values and subordinate the US to the will of the outside tyrants, not to the will of free American citizens.<sup>21</sup>

Historically this perception was at the heart of American isolationism. Today it is one of the strongest sources of the US unilateralism. Because of this tradition it is easier for the US to abstain from involvement in this or that issue at all, than to participate in an outside-originated agenda. And this is one of the greatest risks of the US foreign policy that the country and the world is still to face – that the most likely alternative to American leadership will be not equal

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<sup>20</sup> Anne-Marie Slaughter. *The Idea that is America. Keeping Faith with Our Values in a Dangerous World*. Basic Books, 2007, 254; Hunt, Michael H. *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Yale University Press, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Eliassen Restad, H 2012, 'Old Paradigms in History Die Hard in Political Science: US Foreign Policy and American Exceptionalism', *American Political Thought*, 1, 1, pp. 53-76

partnership, but a new edition of isolationism. It is not a coincidence that a neo-isolationist agenda is the only alternative that the US policy world, namely right-wing libertarian Republicans allied with the Tea Party Movement, presents today to the two patterns of maintaining leadership.

Forth, playing on equals and joining the others' agendas contradicts to the history of American foreign policy. The US has no history of such behavior. It jumped from isolationism to hegemony, from staying apart of international orders of the others to establishing, managing and expanding its own international order, which by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century seemed to be able to become universal. So, we may actually be at the birth of a profoundly new pattern and philosophy of the US participation in the international affairs, unmatched in the US history. And moving along an unknown way is always difficult.

Fifth, accepting equality and other's agendas contradicts to the empirical fact of remaining US preponderance and primacy in many aspects of power.<sup>22</sup> It is still the biggest economy in the world and most diversified and sustainable among the developed countries, and will probably continue to be so. The US dollar is still, despite all the problems, remains to be the major exchange and reserve currency, and its substitution doesn't exist. The US is still the anchor and most influential player of the existing global economic governance institutions, and they are unlikely to be dissolved in the observable future. The US still accumulates roughly half of the world's defense spending. And although the gap between it and China starts narrowing, decades will come before China catches up (and if it sustains the current growth levels, which is also unlikely). As for the US technological preponderance in defense sector, it is by now simply uncatchable. The US is still the only country in the world with global power projection capabilities and having military presence on all continents, except for Antarctic. Even in the US global military posture narrows, it will still be incomparable with that of the others. Finally, The US is still the only country having a global system of alliances and partnerships, and this also is unlikely to change, even though the nature of these relationships is likely to undergo transformations (alliances becoming less hegemonic and more equal, etc.).<sup>23</sup>

All this reality creates a powerful temptation for the US to continue its commitment to global leadership. However, another undeniable, though paradoxical, reality of today is that the world, while remaining unipolar from this material perspective, is multipolar in terms of decision-making and global governance. Despite all its material power, the US is unable to pursue an

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<sup>22</sup> Rachman, Gideon, 'Think again: American decline', *Foreign Policy*, Jan.–Feb. 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Joffe, Josef, 'The default power: the false prophecy of America's decline', *Foreign Affairs* 88: 5, Sept.Oct. 2009, pp. 21–35.



effective policy unilaterally and ignore the others. It does need the other centers of power – as well as they need the US.<sup>24</sup>

Sixth, the US would find it very difficult to depart from global leadership because there is still a demand for US involvement on leading terms from many parts of the world. It exists in Europe, in Asia, in the Middle East, in the Post-Soviet space, in Latin America and in Africa. Countries in all regions, who link their security with the US, have huge concerns about the current discussions in the US about revising its global commitments and responsibilities. Europeans, Israel and Middle Eastern countries, for instance, are very worrisome about the “pivot” to Asia. Frankly, such a demand as a rule is absent only among the new rising powers and countries hostile to the US. And even the former require American leadership and involvement on many occasions. While rejecting it on the other. This is one of the manifestations of non-linearity and complexity of the world today.

First, The US produces a disciplinary effect on the behavior of new rising states and powerful countries in general – those who do not base their security on the US. In the absence of the US power they could have allowed more assertive and even aggressive policies. The example of Russia and Georgia – and the fact that Russia did not go to capture Tbilisi and topple President Saakashvili down suits well here. In this case the US act as a balancer and stabilizer of the multipolar world, which otherwise would have been even more prone to conflicts.

Second, the US is still producer of security for several dozens of states, who base on the US their security or even survival.

Third, the US as the only country with global power projection capabilities is and will remain to be indispensable for managing and resolving many of today’s conflicts and security challenges, the resolution of which require force, at least in the background.

Forth, the US is the key and in many instances the only power today that takes transnational globalization-driven threats and challenges seriously. Indeed, as far as today these very challenges, and not traditional contradictions and rivalry among nations, constitute the major risks and threats for the US national security.

## **New Nature of US Leadership**

What kind of US leadership is both desirable and possible in the world, which demands and rejects the US leadership and involvement at the same time, that is both multipolar and globally interdependent, that is unipolar “mathematically”, but multipolar in terms of decision-making

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph S. Nye. *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*. Oxford University Press, 2002. P. 240.

and driving the events, a world in which power is shifted and diffused, in which not just new powers, but also relatively small and medium ones strive for an independent voice to be heard and participation in regional and even global decision-making, in which new powers need to be “paid” for their engagement with the US on an American agenda?

As the US leadership and active involvement worldwide is still necessary for so many things, and a world without the US involvement would be a much more dangerous place, than it is today, the discourse should be about gradual and fundamental transformation of US leadership, rather than about rejecting it at once and creating a “fortress America”. The latter would not rescue the US from transnational threats, but rather aggravate them, together with the traditional inter-national ones. In a globalized world oceans no longer provide protection.

First and foremost, the commitment to pervasive global leadership, as a philosophy of the US participation in international affairs, should be gradually rejected. It is better to do this without loud declarations, but rather curling down US practical involvement on a leadership basis.

Secondly, the US approach to leadership should be differentiated both in terms of geographic scope, functional areas and timing, in order to reflect the precise situation in each, especially with the distribution of power and the share of American primacy, if there is one, presence of the others’ agendas or their absence, nature of these agendas, etc. Depending on these factors, in some the US would preserve its role as a benign hegemon and primer agenda-setter, in other ones this leadership will be diminished, and the US would play a role of *primus inter parem*, while in third ones the US should be prepared to act on an equal basis and be ready accept the others’ agendas or transform its own, play a role of a classic pole of a multipolar system.

For instance, in global economic governance the US should accept a role of a first among the equals and give more responsibilities and decision-making authorities to the new poles. So far it has reluctant to do so, especially as regards voting shares in Bretton Woods institutions. In dealing with global climate change it should accept equal role in the longer-term prospect, but keep leadership for a while, because the major CO2 emitters among the rising powers don’t take the issue seriously, while the EU, which has for years been trying to put itself as a leader here, is unable to engage them.

In the field of international security the US approach should be differentiated as well. It should retain for the time being leadership functions in dealing with transnational threats and continue attempts to engage the rising powers in this affair. The major difficulty here lies in domestic politics, for the remaining polarization would prevent the US to accept the agendas of the others and adjust its own agenda, which is necessary for engaging the rising powers.

As for the other aspects of international security, the US should move towards the role of an off-shore balancer, rather than a global sheriff. Indeed, getting involved in all the problems of international security and pushing its agenda is unnecessary, wasteful and counter-productive. It triggers and increases resentment on the part of many local players, especially the new great powers and players more or less independent on the US in their security, and fails to achieve desired results. Even less successful in terms of gaining and sustaining leadership is a policy of containing the rising power centers, to which the US dooms itself if performing as a global sheriff.

On the contrary, off-shore balancing would allow the US to deal with inter-national security challenges more effectively, and without the negative consequences. First, off-shore balancing would still discipline the new rising powers. Moreover, this disciplinary effect might be even greater, for the share of resentment towards the US on the part of the rising powers will reduce. Second, off-shore balancing presumes empowering the allies and partners to deal with the challenges and problems that today are managed by the US. Indeed, on those matters that are beyond the scope of the US vital national interests the US is interested in the threat being eliminated, rather than in elimination according to an American vision and agenda. It also presumes allowing the new rising powers assuming their responsibility for managing problems in their neighborhood – if the way of this management does not pose a threat to the US vital interests and security.

The reading of American interests and what constitutes a threat to US national security should also be reviewed. A careful differentiation is needed in terms of what is really vital for the US security and well-being, and what is secondary or illusory. Management of secondary issues should be transferred to the others and the US should be ready to accept the others' agenda on their management. This would inevitably lead to reduction of scope and deepness of the US involvement, whereas US vital national security interests apart from those globalization-driven will undergo “regionalization”. It means that not the whole Earth would be an area of these vital interests, but certain regions. In this sense, the US would in this case start acting as a “normal” great power in a multipolar world – with the only difference that its “sphere of responsibility” will be greater than those of the other poles.

Such a regionalization of interests would solve many problems between the US and the other powerful states, which today resent US involvement into areas of their national interests. A clear illustration. In the world of today, with the rise of China and growing Sino-American competition in Asia Pacific, with all the troubles the US has at the Broader Middle East it does not really matter for the future of the US primacy, security and well-being, whether Russia

dominates the Post-Soviet space or not, whether Ukraine or Kirgizstan joins Russia-centric integration projects in the region, or not. Whereas US containment of Russia in the region was and partly remains to be the gravest contradiction on their agenda.

Assuming off-shore balancing strategy would determine that the US-centered international order, which today is no longer global, especially in security field, but nevertheless encompassing many states and regions, would have to be reformed accordingly. Again, this order should be differentiated, remaining hegemonic in some cases and allowing greater equality and agenda-setting sharing in the other. It is clear, for instance, that European NATO members should acquire greater role in setting the agenda of the alliance, but assume greater responsibilities, including defense spending, as well.

In this sense the discourse that originated in the US national security community in 2010-2011 and manifested in the Mr “Y”’s “National Strategic Narrative” paper, the crucial decisions undertaken by the Obama administration in 2011-2012, including reduction of defense budget and Armed Forces size, as well as the changes in defense policy proclaimed in the 2012 Strategic Defense Guidance, modalities of the US involvement into the Libyan war, and, finally, the US “pivot” towards Asia are all steps in a right, predictable and unavoidable direction, 1<sup>st</sup> swallows in a policy of rebalancing of the US national interests, reviewing international responsibilities and involvement from the global embrace to regional targeted approach.

For instance, The Strategic Defense Guidance, reduction of defense budget and reduction of Armed Forces go hand in hand and are of crucial importance. First, they are also centered around the necessity for the US to revise interests, commitments and responsibilities. Second, the very fact of the US budget reduction after 2 decade rise is of utmost symbolic importance. Third, and mostly important, these steps proclaim the US rejection of direct imperialism and the highest form of US worldwide involvement – long-term occupation and state-building imposed from above. This is clearly stated in the Strategic Defense Guidance, while the budget and Armed Forces reduction proves this on practice. Power projection, targeted strikes, countering area denial strategies, missile defense, etc., and not counterinsurgency and sustaining vast Army become priorities for the US defense building.

Finally, the “pivot” to Asia, which appears to be the central component of Obama’s Grand Strategy during his 2<sup>nd</sup> term, manifests the described above “regionalization” of the US national interests and security considerations.<sup>25</sup> Although the US claims officially that strengthening focus on Asia does not mean withdrawal from the other regions or shrinking of the US commitments there, in reality it is going to be exactly that way. A clear indicator is that the US is

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<sup>25</sup> Hillary Clinton. America’s Pacific Century. Foreign Policy, November 2011.

reducing military presence in Europe. Not fundamentally, though, but this is just a beginning. Declaring Asia as a priority No 1 is in itself differentiation in terms of priorities.

For the time being the “pivot” is described as an instrument to sustain US global leadership. Indeed, as the world’s center of gravity is moving towards the Pacific, it is necessary for a leader to refocus accordingly. What is not mentioned, though, is that there is no US leadership today in this region. There are claims for leadership, but they are rejected by China and India at least. So, the US can not be described as a leader in the central region of the international system, but rather as one of the leaders, even being the strongest one. Hence, over time, as the US attempts to engage China and even India into an American international order will remain to be unsuccessful, the “pivot” will more and more become less about global leadership and more about protecting US national interests and security in this crucial region.

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