

## INTERNATIONAL POWER IN THE 21ST CENTURY

### KEY NOTES

While military power is still critical, world politics have changed so much since the end of World War II that we must rethink the nature of power and how to use it.

The world is not flat. However, the United States is still alone at the top of a tiered power structure and is still regarded around the world (if not by American authors) as the key and leading power.

Power is not soft. Soft power should be thought of as doing sensible things that lay the groundwork for the future application of power, that lower resistance in societies to power, and that make the medicine go down better. But it's not power.

The central operating principle of our international system is *mutual indispensability*: the United States remains the necessary leader on all major global issues, but other nations are also necessary partners in any solution.

Machiavelli's *The Prince*, focused as it was on waging war and wielding military force, shaped the conduct of international affairs for nearly 450 years, from the time it was published at the dawn of the nation-state in the early 1500s until after World War II. With few exceptions during that period, nations with strong militaries commanded, and the weak obeyed. Leslie Gelb, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations and former *New York Times* columnist and Op-Ed page editor, outlines the shift in the last 50 years or so from the dominance of military power toward economic power. He maintains that while military power is still critical, world politics have changed so much since the end of World War II that we must rethink the nature of power and how to use it. That said, Gelb disputes the notion that globalization has made the world flat, and that there is any such thing as soft power: the United States is still very much alone at the top, and yet American ideas and values—while they may help lay the groundwork for the application of power—are not in themselves powerful. The central operating principle of our international system is *mutual indispensability*: the United States remains the necessary leader on all major global issues, but other nations are also necessary partners in any solution. Excerpts of Gelb's remarks are reprinted here.

### Historical Background

For centuries after he wrote *The Prince*, Machiavelli was considered the power master of international relations. He told the prince that if he only learned one thing, he must learn the art of war. And for 450 years thereafter, that Machiavellian rule about the art of war shaped the essential conduct

of international affairs. It wasn't terribly subtle. If kings from nation-states that had organized their national treasure to put together effective armies wanted something, by and large, they got it. There are very few exceptions to that throughout history. But there were straws in the wind that no one paid attention to. Hints of what was to come, hints of today. A streak across just the mountaintops of history takes us to the first exception: the American Revolution. It was an extraordinary event. We think of it as an extraordinary event in the world of ideas—the creation of a democracy—and it was. But it was also the first occasion where some ragtag soldiers beat the most potent armed force in the world; in fact the largest force Britain had ever sent overseas. And the Americans didn't beat the British by lining up for conventional battle. They did it by fighting unconventional warfare, and they won.

There was another straw in the wind that no one really noticed. It seemed so insignificant, but it too indicated the future. And that was the slave rebellion in Haiti, not long after the American Revolution. The island belonged to France, but the British had the largest stake in the slave trade, and they sent an even bigger army to Haiti to put down the slave revolt, and lost again.

These events showed that something was happening: the weak could resist the strongest armies. Napoleon ran into that in spades in Russia. He conquered Moscow, but he couldn't conquer all of Russia. The historical inevitability begins to gather momentum. We see the French getting kicked out of Indochina, the United States losing in Vietnam. And then, perhaps most striking of all, the Soviet Union sends more than 150,000 men into Afghanistan, right on its borders, and loses despite using almost all possible military brutality. That loss led to the end of the Soviet Union.



These were extraordinary events. They didn't look like anything but aberrations, but they were historical pointers, shades of what was to happen to the United States in Kabul and Afghanistan, in Baghdad and Iraq.

What was happening underneath was that nations were figuring out how to organize their economic resources to make armies, promote their economies, and promote their military conquests. When the United Nations was created after World War II, there were only 47 nation-states in the world, and before that, the numbers were even smaller. But others were learning to play the game as well—basically learning to become nation-states. It was the rise of resistance. Nation-states could resist better than the tribes or kingdoms that the European empires had dominated. They had the will to resist. The

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strong could command, but the price of overcoming resistance was growing all the time. And military force was becoming more expensive all the time. So after World War II, the utility of military force began to decline.

The power of economic transactions was on the rise. We saw it in the American advantage over everybody else after World War II. All the other major powers were stricken. We were strong. And it gave the United States the opportunity to say how we thought the international economic world should be shaped, and we shaped it, by and large. At the end of this era, the power of military force, the arbiter of history for almost 500 years, was in doubt.

Here are the three realities of this new era:

### ***The World is Not Flat***

After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States was left as the sole superpower in the world—I would say with absolute power unequalled in history. To this day, the United States spends more on defense—about \$750 billion per year—than almost all the rest of the world put together. We still account for about 22 percent of the world's gross domestic product. And, to the extent any nation dominates the world diplomatic stage, it's us.

We're standing alone on the stage, and what happens? We immediately start to focus on this phenomenon of globalization. Tom Friedman led the way with his famous *The World is Flat* book, but

others now are saying essentially the same thing—that power has been equalized, that no state can really exercise power over any other, that even nongovernmental organizations and businesses are as strong as states, that the world is nonpolar or flat. But the plain facts deny it. By any measure, the United States is still alone at the top of a tiered power structure. Consider our military power: Our military power is such that we can take over almost any capital in the world. But we can't conquer countries. We got a hold of Kabul in a matter of weeks and drove the Taliban out. We could have finished them off in the mountains, but didn't. We drove Saddam out of Baghdad in a few weeks. The initial military assaults were successful—but President Bush didn't think about what we were going to do after we won a military victory. The only countries whose capitals we can't conquer are Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and the like. But otherwise, American military power still counts in the minds of people around the world. We may be denigrating it here, but they think about it there.

On almost any what I would call first-tier international economic issue, the United States is still regarded around the world (if not by American authors) as the key and leading power. If the issue is international environmental questions, the rest of the world always looks to us. On international economic matters, the United States is the key to any new world trade agreement. We're the key to economic sanctions. The rest of the world looks to us to fill that role.

In terms of leadership against international terrorism—organizing, collaborating, and intelligence or police work, it's all back to us. The same is true for failed state problems. Other countries all recognize the issues with failed states, but unless we act, they don't act. The prime example of this is Darfur; the whole world bemoans the situation there but does nothing about it, because we aren't in the lead. If we were in the lead providing the logistics and the intelligence and the backup support, they'd go in there and deal with the situation. But absent American leadership, they don't.

I can't recall a single instance in any of those first-tier issues—failed states, terrorism, international trade, economic sanctions, and so forth—when any nation or group of nations didn't look to the United States for leadership. Now, that isn't to say 20 years hence, with the deterioration we see here in our country and the increase in economic might in those other countries, that this won't come to pass. But we're far from it now. Today, the world is not flat, and we're still at the top of the pyramid.

### ***Power is Neither Soft Nor Hard***

Power is not soft. Persuasion just doesn't work in international relations. It is one of the rarest of occurrences when any of us has been able to convince someone else, let alone the leaders of a nation-state, that we understand their interests better than they

do. They understand what their interests are. We can change those interests by putting goodies on the table or withholding goodies, but we can't persuade them in any classic intellectual sense that we understand their interests better than they do.

And as far as ideas are concerned, this is not the Cold War era, when Americans were essentially united in a democracy and freedom platform against the Soviet Union. We are a country ourselves divided about our ideas and our values. What's more, we're divided from the world. We like to think that it's 1945, and leaders around the world look to our Declaration of Independence and say, "I want to be like them." The world is a very different place now.

Islamic societies run the range from very good, moderate, sensible people to the other end of the spectrum, the horrors. But even the good, moderate, sensible people don't care for America or American values. There is a clash of ideas. Look at how they treat women in so many of those countries. And this isn't a flash in the pan; this is how they view the role of women in Islamic societies. And it's fundamentally at odds with our view. They may view elections as something that can be tolerated, but they want to make sure the results are right. That's what they mean by Islamic democracy.

Given the values of these people and civilizations, American democracy isn't their ideal. There's another model for a lot of them, and that's Pinochet in Chile, and the rulers in China, who modernize their state with dictatorship. And we say that's no good and it won't last, but others look at it and say, that's not a bad model. So there are other ideas, other values out there. Our values don't rule the waves.

Soft power shouldn't be thought of as power. It should be thought of as our doing sensible things that lay the groundwork for the future application of power, that lower resistance in societies to power, and that make the medicine go down better. But it's not power. It's not the way you're going to bring Hezbollah and Hamas and the Taliban around.

But power is not hard either. It's still almost irresistible to think of military force as power. Force certainly looks like power in terms of getting others to do what they don't want to do. But war itself is essentially a physical act, whereas power is essentially psychological and political. The line between force and power is a thin one and should keep leaders alert to searching for creative means of getting what they want by pressure and coercion, short of the great financial and human sacrifices required by war. War represents an order of costs and consequences entirely different from any imaginable exercise of power or psychological arm wrestling.

Whereas conservatives lose track of power's meaning when they hearken only to the sound of the cannon, liberals levitate above reality when guided by their hearts. There is a time

and place for the exercise of the entire spectrum of power and power-related actions, ranging from trying persuasion to resorting to the use of force. But the results are usually unsatisfactory. Generally, if anything is to be accomplished in the international arena, if problems are to be solved, it requires the effective employment of power. And power itself, as we have seen, is increasingly difficult to wield successfully. That's why it's more important than ever to understand power correctly.

Power comes down to getting people or groups to do something they don't want to do. Power is mental arm wrestling. It is about manipulating one's own resources and position to pressure and coerce psychologically and politically.

### ***Power in the 21st Century***

How do we think about power in this kind of world? We are the only lead nation in the world on the frontier issues, the ones I have described. I don't think any world leader contests that. We are the indispensable leader in the world. But there's almost no front-order important issue that we can solve by ourselves, whether it's trade, or climate, or Sudan, or Iraq, or Iran—we cannot solve any of these things by ourselves. We need others. We need key partners, depending on the issue, like China, Russia, India, Japan, Europe, and so forth. They are the indispensable partners in this power relationship. The absolutely unprecedented power reality in this world is *mutual indispensability*. The key is to create that co-power coalition.

To do that, we have to compromise. That is the dirtiest word in American politics. Politicians can say, as you are beginning to hear now, "We ought to listen to other countries. We ought to take their views into account." But compromise still looks like a giveaway in American politics. If presidents want to forge those power coalitions to get cooperation to address problems, though, they're going to have to compromise.

What we really have going for us, and the key to concocting a power strategy for the future, is our ability to solve problems. That's what makes us the indispensable leader. We can have the title, but the real power comes from helping to solve the problem, be it climate change, trade, or failed states.

This is not beyond the United States of America. Despite our obvious deterioration in the last seven-plus years, this country has shown, on critical occasions, that it can do brilliant things in the world. Let me cite you just one—my favorite, because it's so extraordinary—to show that we're capable of it, and to point the way to what we might do in the future.

That is, what President Truman, George Marshall, Dean Acheson, Robert Lovett, and others put together in the 1940s, these great international institutions—the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, NATO—all multilateral institutions that the United States led. These institutions

all exist to this day. We exercise primary power in them. Others recognize us as the leader, but we don't try to dominate and tell others what to do. Essentially, these institutions were created with the notion that they would eventually lead to American strength around the world. They would solve problems, and it would help us deal with our adversaries and enemies from a better position, deal with them through strength.

Today we've got to put together that kind of strategic power diplomacy, built on the idea of mutual indispensability. It's the only thing that will work. And we have to use power coalitions to solve problems. That's the only way to get us out of the mess we're in.

This isn't a world in which we're likely to go to nuclear war, or where major powers are likely to engage in conventional battles, as over Korea or even Vietnam, let alone as in World War I or World War II. Those days are pretty much gone. But it's a world of what I call drownings. There are so many failing societies, so many enormous problems. Problems can move swiftly around the globe, be they environmental or health. They're drownings in a world where the main actors—governments, nation-states—don't have the capacity, the will, or the leadership skills to deal with them. And we're drowning now in this country, with economic deterioration, with the deterioration of our politics and our public school system. It's the drownings we have to worry about.

### **Higher Education's Role in Rethinking Power and Strategy**

To put together this strategy of mutual indispensability, we're going to have to start learning more about other societies, because if you want to exercise the kind of power I'm talking about, you really have to know other countries better—much better. You have to know what counts in those societies, and how to intervene there. But our knowledge of other countries is pitiful. I don't have a great deal of faith in the political system correcting itself and doing the things that are necessary: working on strategy, learning about other societies, trying to bring some sort of balance into the American political debate. This is where higher education comes in.

Sometime during the 1960s, the locus of power shifted from universities to think tanks. And we went from a handful of think tanks in Washington, with only a handful of senior fellows, to now a couple hundred think tanks and thousands of senior fellows. Instead of serious scholarship, we have relative intellectual lightness and op-eds. Not to denigrate what was once an important part of my life, but that's what we've got. I always found that the best op-ed writers were those people who had written books. They said the smartest things.

Those ideas aren't coming from the academy any more. The scholarship there is very academic. A lot of people there don't have the same policy expertise that they once did, when there was a lot

of back and forth between government and universities. Now it's back and forth between government and think tanks. And think tank life is very different from university life. You don't begin to have the time for sustained research and sustained thought.

We've got to find some way of restoring the role of the university in public policy, with solid advice based on first-rate scholarship, not based on Washington politics. To do that, you've got to first raise the money and then go recruit good people. There are a lot of good people at think tanks who I think are recruitable to universities. They all came from universities, and I wouldn't be surprised if some of them are tired of the think tank rat race. You have a recruiting edge. I would use that.

Second, higher education has to do something about regional studies. Regional studies are a way of pulling the faculty back to realities, because it gets them teaching history and culture and language, and gets them over to those countries perhaps more than they have been, maybe to live there, not just to visit other elites. To fund that, I would go to foundations.

### **Conclusion**

There has never been a great nation that didn't have a great economy. It's the basis of a good public education system. It's the basis of national security. Never in history has a nation as big a debtor to others as we are today to China, Arab oil producers, and other countries lasted as a great power. I don't think the United States is the be-all, end-all savior of the world, but I think without us, none of the big problems will get successfully tackled. If our economy deteriorates, we'll be in no position to do that. I fear the long-term deterioration of our economy and of our public education system. It will take its toll on our leadership role in the world, and in effect leave the world without anybody to deal with the vast array of problems that are potentially going to drown us. American higher education can help to prevent that outcome.



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