The Atlantic

What's So Great About American World Leadership?

The U.S. voters who rejected decades of bipartisan foreign-policy consensus might be on to something.

Yamada Taro / Getty

HUGH WHITE | 10:41 AM ET | GLOBAL

How has America come to elect a president who so starkly repudiated decades' worth of the largely bipartisan vision of U.S. global leadership? And if that vision won't be the basis of American foreign policy in the 21st century, what will replace it?

The big message of 2016 is that large numbers of American voters, Democrat and Republican, do not buy what their political leaders have been selling for so long, and that includes foreign policy. The evidence of this from Trump's victory is reinforced by Senator Bernie Sanders' remarkable showing in the Democratic primaries, and by years' worth of public-opinion surveys showing the widespread view that the United States "does too much in helping solve world problems." It is also reinforced by the high poll numbers of an outgoing president who has mounted his own quiet campaign against key elements of Washington's foreign-policy orthodoxy.

So it appears the American electorate no longer accepts the American role in the world that policymakers have long taken for granted. And what if the electorate is right? Maybe the foreign-policy assumptions of the past few decades do need to be overhauled. The record, after all, is not very impressive. So far this century, America has failed to achieve most of the key national-security objectives it has set for itself.

TED STORY

Does that sound harsh? Here is a list, in no particular order, of some key goals both the Bush and Obama administrations set for themselves in foreign policy: Prevent North Korea getting nuclear weapons; prevent Iran getting nuclear weapons and contain its growing influence in the Middle East; transform Iraq and

d Trump and the Coming Test of
ational Order

Afghanistan into stable, progressive, pro-Western states, or at least leave them as minimally functioning countries; contain and eventually crush jihadist extremism; harness the Arab Spring to enhance U.S. influence in the Arab world; reconcile Russia to the U.S.-led order and resist its efforts to rebuild a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe; resist China's challenge to the U.S.-led order in Asia; broker a durable settlement between Israel and the Palestinians; and prevent another 9/11 on U.S. soil.

Of all these, the only clear success is the avoidance of another direct major attack on America itself. The nuclear deal with Iran may prove a partial success, but even there the best we can hope is that an Iranian nuclear capability has been deferred. All the rest have been total failures. And yet these are exactly the kind of goals that America should have been able to achieve if it was to fulfill the orthodox vision of its global leadership. That vision is, or has been, that America can and should create and uphold in every region of the world an international order which is based on American values and which supports America's interests. And it should be able to do that without incurring the immense costs and risks it bore in the conflicts of the last century. It is a noble vision, and the world would be a better place if it was realized. But the record suggests it does not corresponded to reality. We'd better ask why.

In the early 1990s America's economy pulled out of a sharp recession, the stunning success of Operation Desert Storm renewed American faith in its armed forces, and the seemingly universal appeal of America's values and ideals appeared vindicated by the swift spread of liberal democracy and market economics in lands liberated from communism. By the middle of the decade it seemed—not just to Americans, but to others all around the world—that America had achieved a remarkable and indeed unprecedented position at the apex of the

global order. The country appeared poised to exercise an unchallenged, benevolent global leadership based on American values, democratic politics, and open markets.

All this was captured by the key phrases of the time— "The End of History," "The Unipolar Moment," "The Indispensable Nation," "The New American Century." These were, for Americans at least, immensely appealing images of the country's place in the world. Especially appealing was how cheap and safe sustaining global leadership looked—far cheaper and safer than containing and defeating the Soviets in the Cold War had been.

Why would any country want to resist U.S.-led order when it seemed to offer prosperity and security to all?

After all, why would any country want to resist U.S.-led order when it seemed to offer prosperity and security to all? Above all, Americans were sure they would face no peer military competitor, and their country's immense preponderance of armed might, along with the support of so many others, meant that it could expect swiftly and easily to defeat any adversary foolish enough to risk challenging U.S. primacy. That lesson was hammered home by Desert Storm.

But it hasn't worked out that way. America has faced no global rivals comparable to the Soviet Union of the Cold War, but in three key parts of the world it has faced serious regional challenges to its vision.

The first is the Middle East, where the primary challenge has come not just from

states like Iran, but from non-state actors. They have used terrorism to contest their region's incorporation into the American-led global order whose politics, ideology, and culture they reject. America's response, in Iraq and Afghanistan, has been to try to create new states that would bring their peoples into the U.S.-led order. That has failed. Likewise, hopes that the Arab Spring might see the countries affected reconstruct themselves on more pro-U.S. lines have been dashed. Instead the state system in key parts of the region has collapsed. This is not all America's fault. But it is now quite clear America has few options that can make much difference to what happens there in the long term, unless it is willing to commit ground forces far larger and for far longer than it ever did in Iraq.

orld that will face America's next ent
nore

The second region in which the post-Cold War vision has been challenged is Eastern Europe. President Vladimir Putin has tried to resist Russia's incorporation into the U.S.-led order, and push its boundaries back from Russia's borders by reasserting a Russian sphere of influence in its "near abroad." His use of armed force and political subversion to do this has naturally revived memories of the Cold War.

Here, too, America has found no effective way to respond. Despite U.S. diplomacy backed by sanctions, Putin continues to pressure Ukraine, deploy missiles on Europe's borders, and make provocative intrusions into European air and sea space. It would appear that only force counts with Putin, and neither America nor its European allies have the conventional forces to confront Russia's army on Russia's own borders. The issues at stake, moreover, are simply not important enough to credibly contemplate escalation to nuclear conflict.

Third there is Asia, where the U.S. faces its greatest challenge from China. It can no longer seriously be questioned that China aims to create a new Chinese-led

regional order in Asia. Nor can it be doubted that China has the strategic weight and national resolve to mount and sustain this challenge. China today is far stronger, in the fundamental economic sources of national strength, than the Soviet Union ever was. And its resolve in the region is stronger than America's, because ultimately what happens in Asia matters more to China than to America. It cannot of course match America in aggregate military power, but it can deny America a swift and easy victory in the Western Pacific and raise the costs of U.S. military action beyond what the stakes might be worth.

Above all, as a nuclear power, China can deny America the use of its nuclear forces to offset China's growing conventional military capability. Just as in the Cold War Washington used the threat of nuclear attack to counter the Soviets' preponderance of conventional forces, so it increasingly relies on the nuclear deterrent in Asia today as China's fast-growing naval and air forces erode America's traditional maritime supremacy. But China's nuclear arsenal, though too small to fight a full-scale nuclear war, can still devastate American cities, which means it can deter America from using its nuclear forces to ensure victory in a new Pacific War.

These military calculations are critical in both Eastern Europe and in Asia, because in both regions we are back in the world of traditional power politics. Power politics is what happens when great powers compete to define their roles and influence in a shifting international order. Diplomacy has its place in that kind of competition, but military power and the will to use it are the final arbiters. Ultimately, the lineaments of any international order are defined by the issues on which great powers are willing to go to war with one another—as we can see if we look back at the Cold War. We thought we'd put all that behind us after 1989, but Russia and China apparently don't agree.

So America faces a tough reality. To maintain its global leadership through prevailing in these three regions, it would have to build forces far, far larger than

today's, and accept strategic commitments and risks as grave as those it accepted during the Cold War— including the risk of devastating nuclear attack on America itself. Just as in the Cold War, America's conventional forces are too weak to deter or defeat a highly motivated regional challenger on its own doorstep, and any resort to nuclear forces would entail a real risk of retaliation on U.S. cities.

Is it worth it? Does fulfilling the post-Cold War vision of U.S. leadership matter enough to the American people for them to shoulder these costs and risks for decades to come? It is far from clear that it does. This is not, after all, the Cold War—when America confronted a global power which could have dominated Eurasia and threatened America in the Western Hemisphere—which was quite directly about the defense of the United States itself.

None of these regional challengers threaten America directly the way the Soviet Union had the potential to do. Even assuming U.S. preeminence to be good for America and good for the world, it is not nearly as important to America as containing the Soviet Union was.

That is why, for some years now, America has failed to achieve most of the objectives it has set itself in the name of sustaining its vision of global leadership. Its leaders have failed to observe the precept so memorably enunciated by Walter Lippmann in 1943, when he wrote that a credible foreign policy "consists in bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, a nation's commitments and a nation's power."

"And," he might have added, "a nation's resolve."

This has happened because leaders, policymakers, and analysts—almost the whole foreign-policy establishment—has been so slow to recognize the mismatch that Lippmann warned against. They have underestimated the strength and resolve of key regional rivals, and overestimated America's. They have kept

talking about America's "unmatched economic dynamism" and "unchallengeable military preponderance" to convince Americans that they can easily afford to sustain their vision of global leadership, when bitter experience so plainly shows otherwise. And they have been, understandably, reluctant to let go of a vision that seemed to offer so much, not just to Americans, but to the world. For that, at least, one cannot blame them.

Perhaps democracy works after all, at least to identify problems if not to choose the right person to find solutions.

But now it seems the American electorate has told them to think again. Perhaps democracy works after all, at least to identify problems if not to choose the right person to find solutions. It is hard to imagine anyone less suited to conceive and create a new and more sustainable vision of America's role on the world than its president-elect. His mix of bullying belligerency and "America First" isolationism suggests that he will apply American power either too forcefully or not forcefully enough. That risks escalating crises and raising the chances of major war, a complete unravelling of U.S. influence beyond the Western Hemisphere—or quite possibly both.

So don't count on his leadership. Others will have to try over the next few years to conceive a more sustainable consensus about America's role in the world. There are two critical starting points. The first is that America still has immense resources—economic, military, ideological and institutional—to contribute to shaping and sustaining a stable and secure world order. America is not as

overwhelmingly preponderant as most people thought it would be, but it remains an exceptionally powerful country whose influence, realistically exercised, can do a great deal to make the world better and safer both for Americans and for the rest of us.

The second is that America can do little without partners—real partners, not followers. America in the decades to come will be one of the world's most powerful states, but only one among several. It will have no choice but to share power, which will mean constant compromise and accommodation of conflicting views and aims. The alternative to dealing with other major powers as equals is to confront them as rivals.

LATEST VIDEO

What Ancient Mariners Have in Common With NASA Scientists

A short film explains how they both use a technique called "slingshotting" to explore new worlds.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

HUGH WHITE is a professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University in Canberra and a former senior Australian Defence official.