

The Dispensable Nation?

Brent Scowcroft

WE ARE still slow to recognize how revolutionary the changes sweeping the globe are. The forces unleashed by globalization are as important to determining the shape of the coming age as industrialization was two hundred years ago.

Will the United States remain the “indispensable nation” in global affairs under these new conditions? It depends on what you mean by the term.

There is one form of American indispensability that, thus far, no other power or bloc has demonstrated—not the Chinese, not the Europeans—the ability to mobilize the world community to undertake the great projects of the day. We, the United States, act as the catalyst. Yes, it is true that India can summon some of the other members of the developing world under its banner, and the Europeans have shown that it is possible for the nations of that continent to work together in support of shared goals. But at the end of the day, no other country can rally nations from different parts of the world and from both the developed and developing world to join truly multinational coalitions with a global reach.

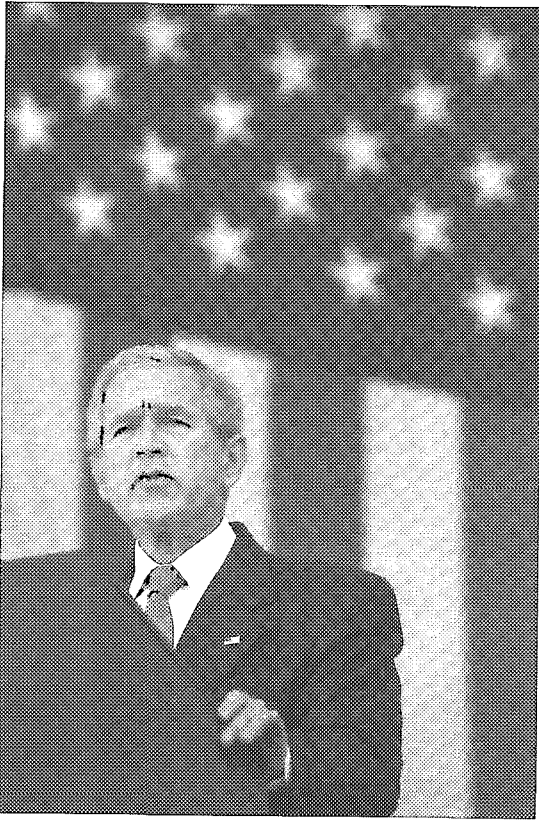
But we are not indispensable in the sense that those of us in Washington are

the only ones who know what needs to be done for the good of the entire human race, and that the rest of the world can either join us or be against us. And we have discovered over the last decade that it is increasingly difficult for us to build together any meaningful sort of coalition acting on that belief. It doesn't provide leadership and only engenders resistance.

Iran provides an excellent example of this. As long as we maintained the only solution to Tehran's apparent desire for a nuclear-weapons capacity was regime change, nothing happened. As we began to back away from that stance—first acquiescing in the approach taken by the EU-3, then more actively joining with the Europeans to pursue a diplomatic approach, and finally reaching out to the Russians and the Chinese—we have seen progress. We are not there yet, and there is no guarantee that we will succeed. But at the end of the day there is a solid front based on the consensus that Iran must not acquire nuclear arms.

One reason we have had difficulty in assembling coalitions, and why some have begun to talk about the emergence of a “new world order” where countries will seek to bypass the United States, is the fact that we are losing our aura of “specialness”, the belief that the United States is a different sort of great power than the others—and as a result, people are increasingly unwilling to give us and our policies the benefit of the doubt. We are

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increasingly treated as any other wholly self-interested power.

But all of this comes at a time when the forces of change unleashed both by the end of the Cold War and by the onset of globalization make it much more difficult for individual nation-states, each on its own, to cope with the threats of this new world. National borders are eroding. Globalization has accelerated the development of horizontal supply chains in which raw materials, components and know-how travel across national boundaries. There are positive benefits to all of this—among them, cheaper and more inexpensive goods available to an ever-widening and growing global middle class—but it also makes it far harder to seal off one's country from the consequences of global pandemics, from the growing competition for energy resources or the changes wrought by large-scale migration. Over the next several decades, states

are increasingly going to be driven to cooperate to solve these problems.

I KNOW that some have proposed a new league or assembly of the world's democratic states as a solution. And if the goal of such a body is to assist in the promotion and extension of democratic norms around the world, that is fine. But seeing this as some sort of a new bloc in world affairs is a bad idea. It is not useful at this juncture to again be dividing the world up between the good and the evil. Moreover, most countries are, at this point in time, motivated by a variety of interests, and shared commitment to a democratic form of governance is not the best yardstick. If you look at some of the recent controversies that have divided countries at the United Nations or at other global gatherings, it has not been a clash between democracies and non-democracies, but often between developing and developed nations. For example, India, the world's largest democracy, has been in the vanguard of the states resisting U.S.-inspired proposals for reform at the United Nations.

I do think it is very important, however, for the Atlantic community to regroup. The transatlantic rifts of the last several years, especially over Iraq, have frayed the ties that bind. And we do have an important foundational base: We share with the Europeans a common view of the individual and his relationship to government and society.

Europe is in the midst of a fundamental change, spurred by the arrival of new leaders. The election of Angela Merkel as chancellor of Germany in 2005, followed by Nicolas Sarkozy's victory in the French presidential elections this spring, offers the possibility that the Franco-German axis that is at the heart of the European Union will now be more open to alignment with the United States in

pursuing truly cooperative ventures, rather than seeking to compete with America. A strengthened Atlantic community, in turn, is therefore in a position to work with other major powers and regional blocs to advance an agenda for common action on such matters as the environment.

And this underscores the point that we need a new paradigm for international affairs. The major multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations, were crafted in a different era. Today's UN is grappling with two contradictory principles: how to reconcile the sovereign independence of the nation-state with the "responsibility to protect." In much of the developing world, there is still great concern that the latter equals a blank check for the major powers to interfere in their domestic affairs—and that the advance of globalization is basically a policy promoted by the West to replace old-style colonialism with a new rationale for domination.

The United States must also come to terms with its own post-Cold War euphoria. Prior to the collapse of the USSR, our stance was that every country in the world needed to be free to determine its own social and political destiny; we stood against the attempts of the Soviet Union to impose Marxism-Leninism by force around the world. In the aftermath of the momentous events of 1989 and 1991, it seemed that the United States was now in such a unique position—having so much of the world's military and economic power at its disposal—that we had almost no choice but to take advantage of this power to transform the world along liberal and democratic lines. Many here felt that we had no time to waste and that our traditional methods—forging alliances and constructing international organizations—would take too long, that our historical moment would be lost. Some hoped that by acting unilaterally, we could achieve good results—and that

other nations would recognize after the fact that we had taken the right steps and would approve.

Well, we haven't succeeded in pulling off any grand transformation, certainly not in the Middle East, and we're also seeing the fragility of democratic changes, for example, in Latin America and in Russia. Moreover, we haven't received credit for our good intentions. The fact that in nearly every poll the United States is more disliked around the world than at any point in history is telling.

Part of the problem is that the nature of power has been changing. I've often said that our defense and intelligence communities are still finely honed for dealing with the military threats of the twentieth century. But, as we are finding in Iraq, we are being wrestled to a draw by opponents who are not even an organized state adversary. Our carrier battle groups, our heavy-tank divisions, our satellite imaging systems—all the pillars of our ability to project power to contain and beat back the challenges of a conventional superpower rival—aren't of much use.

We live in a time when conflict is now much more likely to be waged within states—particularly as a state collapses—or between a state and non-state actors. And the stresses the global system has been subjected to will only increase as larger portions of the developing world—especially Latin America, Africa and the vast interiors of the major Asian powers like China and India—become integrated into the global system. And as we've seen, even in a country like Iraq, the United States—on its own—cannot secure every border, inspect every cargo, staff every school, man every checkpoint. Increasingly, power, in a broad sense, resides more in the collectivity of states rather than in the hands of any individual power.

The world is not susceptible to U.S. domination—but without U.S. leadership not much can be achieved. □



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TITLE: The Dispensable Nation?
SOURCE: National Interest no90 JI/Ag 2007
PAGE(S): 4-6

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