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## Power, Leadership and US Foreign Policy

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# Power, Leadership and US Foreign Policy

Erik Jones

American leadership is not simply a matter of going it alone and bearing all of the burden ourselves. Real leadership creates the conditions and coalitions for others to step up as well; to work with allies and partners so that they bear their share of the burden and pay their share of the costs; and to see that the principles of justice and human dignity are upheld by all.<sup>1</sup>

When Barack Obama committed American military forces to the joint intervention in Libya, he had to satisfy three constituencies at once. To begin with, he had to convince realists in his own administration that this action was in the national interest. He also had to reassure pragmatists both inside and outside the administration that the operations would not prove too costly to sustain either in terms of blood or treasure. Finally, he had to make it clear to all Americans that the United States was playing a 'leading' role.

The realists were never going to be satisfied. Although there were many voices in the administration speaking in favour of humanitarian intervention and the right to protect, they could not convince the realists to come over to their idealist perspective. Hence the realists were overpowered by the followers of norms.<sup>2</sup> The result is a fudge. Obama's suggestion that it would not be in America's interest to allow the unchecked slaughter of Libyan civilians does not logically require that it is in America's interest to use military force to do the checking.

The pragmatists were easier to placate, at least at the outset. Both the US military and the federal budget were badly overstretched and yet there were still enough resources to support the bombing of anti-aircraft installations and aircraft on the

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<sup>1</sup> US President Barack Obama, "Address to the Nation on Libya", 28 March 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya>

<sup>2</sup> See H. Cooper and S. L. Meyers, "Obama Takes Hard Line with Libya after Shift by Clinton", *New York Times*, 18 March 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/africa/19policy.html>

ground. The problems began to emerge later, once it became clear that Qaddafi would not surrender and that the rebels were too inexperienced and ineffective to topple his regime. The European allies faced challenges of their own in marshalling support and munitions.<sup>3</sup> So while Obama insisted that the American contribution would focus on the superpower's "unique capabilities", this left open the possibility for redefining 'unique' to encompass an ever widening array of commitments. Congressional support began to waiver soon after the sixty-day time limit for unilateral executive action under the 1973 War Powers Resolution expired, leading to calls for the president to justify continued American involvement.<sup>4</sup>

The issue of American leadership has been salient throughout. Those voices ranged against the realists argue that the United States has a special mission to protect human rights and promote human dignity across the globe. The principled opponents of the pragmatists insist that the United States should uphold its values abroad no matter what the costs. These constituencies are natural allies for the Obama administration, and their influence weighed heavily on his 2009 Nobel prize lecture. Their starting point is that the United States should play a leading role. Here Obama's supporters are joined by his opponents. Virtually everyone in the United States believes their country should lead the globe. To deny that would be to deny that America is 'exceptional'.

The Obama administration's efforts to explain their view on American leadership are an attempt to square the circle. Administration officials argue that American leadership lies in helping European allies rise up to the challenge, shoulder the burdens, and accept responsibility for the consequences. Following the logic of this argument, it is in America's national interest to help the British and the French act in their own national interest. Meanwhile, the United States can husband its resources by encouraging the British and the French to substitute their own. Outgoing Defense Secretary Robert Gates put the case succinctly in an interview with the *Financial Times*: "I'm the quintessential believer in American exceptionalism. I believe we are different than everybody else. I do believe we are the indispensable nation. But for all those reasons, we can walk a little lighter."<sup>5</sup>

This argument about American leadership has not been easy to sell, particularly on the right. Republicans like presidential hopeful Mit Romney have derided Obama for "leading from behind", Henry Kissinger has dismissed it as disingenuous, and

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<sup>3</sup> See K. De Young and G. Jaffe, "NATO Runs Short on Some Munitions in Libya", *Washington Post*, 15 April 2010, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/nato-runs-short-on-some-munitions-in-libya/2011/04/15/AF307EID\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/nato-runs-short-on-some-munitions-in-libya/2011/04/15/AF307EID_story.html)

<sup>4</sup> See C. Savage, "Libya Effort is Called Violation of War Act", *New York Times*, 25 May 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/26/world/middleeast/26powers.html>

<sup>5</sup> P. Spiegel, "Defence: NATO's Troubled Terrain", *Financial Times*, 27 June 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c9291eb8-a0ea-11e0-adae-00144feabdc0.html#>

Council on Foreign Relations President Richard Haass has described it as half-hearted – either the President should commit fully or he should not commit at all.<sup>6</sup> The left has also been critical for fear that the coalition will crumble and the European allies will not finish the job. The protection of fundamental rights and the promotion of universal values should not be left to the fickle or faint of heart.

The argument in this article is that such critiques are neither fair nor accurate and the model of leadership being promoted by the Obama administration is more than just a clever bit of rhetorical sleight-of-hand. Indeed, Obama's notion of leadership as creating the conditions within which others can shoulder the lion's share of responsibility is well-suited to the current international context. Power has bled out of the international system and only collective action can regenerate leverage or control. Yet such collective action depends as much on followers as it depends on leaders. It is not enough simply to announce an objective; it is also necessary to rally others to the common goal.

This argument is important for understanding the past as well as the present. International regime theorists have taught us much about the importance of hegemonic leadership in setting out the rules of the game. What has been less well elucidated is whether and why other countries choose to follow along. This question was uninteresting in the context of the Cold War. The choice between capitalism and communism was not really a choice at all. Outside that Manichean framework, however, it is more difficult to take the motivations of follower states for granted. The contrast between more state and more market is not stark enough to force countries to declare their alignments. Leaders are still inclined to lead and yet followers are less inclined to follow.

This argument has five stages. The first introduces the relationship between power, leadership and collective action. The second explains how this relationship is influenced by changes in the distribution of resources and other notions of power. The third looks at the implications when collective action breaks down. The fourth adds in the economic constraints that confront both the United States and its European allies. The fifth concludes with the challenge of using leadership to regenerate power.

### **Power, leadership and collective action**

Individuals can be weak or powerful; groups can be weak or powerful as well. The difference between strength and weakness is partly a function of the distribution of

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<sup>6</sup> See D. E. Sanger, "Letting Others Lead in Libya", *New York Times*, 23 April 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/24/weekinreview/24intervention.html>. In fairness, the phrase "leading from behind" was given to Romney by the Obama administration itself, and used in Romney's official announcement that he would run for the presidency: <http://mittromney.com/press/2011/06/mitt-romney-launches-presidential-campaign>. See also R. Haass, "What Next in Libya?", *Huffington Post*, 6 April 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-n-haass/what-next-in-libya\\_b\\_845792.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-n-haass/what-next-in-libya_b_845792.html)

resources. It is also a matter of coordination. The distribution side of the argument is well known. Governments with significant resources at their disposal usually run powerful countries. Alliances with significant resources are usually powerful as well. The logic connecting wealth and power is self-evident. What is more difficult to anticipate is why the link from wealth to power would break down. Hence the focus is on coordination rather than the distribution of resources, specifically as that coordination applies to groups.

All things being equal, better coordinated groups are more powerful – meaning they are better able to influence their environments, including the actions of both those within the group and those outside. This is the starting point for Mancur Olson’s *Logic of Collective Action*.<sup>7</sup> It is also the key to Olson’s most counter-intuitive conclusion: because they are better coordinated, smaller groups often overpower larger groups. The obvious question is how to improve coordination within a group. Institutions – rules, norms, conventions – offer one set of solutions, but their effectiveness depends on a mix of incentives and enforcement. This is where leadership comes into play. A leader can create incentives to encourage others to adopt and abide by the rules of the game; a leader can also step in to enforce the rules for those who are less compliant.

This notion of leadership leaves out a number of conventional meanings of the term. For example, it does not include innovation or creativity as a necessary component. The test of leadership is not getting there first; it is getting others to follow.

Such a restrictive notion of leadership changes the way we think about power as well. To begin with, it creates a distinction between the power that comes from collective action, and the power of leaders over followers. The power of collective action lies in the efficient pooling of energy and resources; the power of leadership focuses more narrowly on the ability to create incentives or to impose discipline.

Consider the notion of soft power. The United States creates incentives for collective action by setting itself up as a role model. Countries that seek to emulate the United States are more likely to accept the rules, norms and conventions that it promotes as well.<sup>8</sup> Agenda-setting creates another set of incentives; once countries accept to tackle those issues at the top of the list, they can realistically expect to turn to those issues further down.<sup>9</sup>

Hegemonic stability theory rests on the ability of the hegemon to offer public goods as incentives for compliance. The promise of access to an open market for distressed goods and to a lender of last resort makes it easier to accept norms of reciprocity and non-discrimination. The distribution of costs and benefits from

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<sup>7</sup> Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*.

<sup>8</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*.

<sup>9</sup> Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*.

participation in international trade or capital movements may not be equitable, but the advantages are nevertheless sufficient to win compliance with the regime.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, power can be exercised through coercion as well. As Soviet experience has shown, such coercion can cover a wide spectrum of activities. Here is where the power of the leader and the power generated through collective action intersect. The problem with coercion is that it is such an inefficient means of coordination. The quality of collective action is diminished as a consequence.

The goal here is not to re-litigate the Cold War. Rather it is to suggest only that leaders are better off using incentives than coercion if they want to rely on collective action to generate power. There is nothing new in this assertion. You can find it as easily in the writings of Max Weber as E.H. Carr.<sup>11</sup>

The role of incentives is important once we relax initial assumptions about the distribution of resources, up to now held constant. The focus here is not on how resources are distributed at the outset; rather, it is on how that distribution evolves over time. The reason is simple: any change in the distribution of resources across members of the group has the potential to change the structure of incentives even if the leader's coercive power remains undiminished. In turn this would alter the balance between incentives and coercion in the leader's efforts to foster coordination; the power generated through collective action would dissipate.

### **Distribution and power**

Relevant changes in the distribution of resources can either take place within the group or between insiders and outsiders. Going back to the post-World War II international economic regime as an illustration, it is clear that both forms of redistribution have been important. The rise of Germany within Europe and Europe within the Atlantic Alliance has altered the incentives for Europeans to accept American hegemony. The rise of China and India outside the Western system – and Turkey and Brazil as middle-ranking powers – has altered the incentives to accept the rules, norms and conventions of a Western-dominated world.

These trends are well established in the writings of commentators like Thomas Friedman and Fareed Zakaria.<sup>12</sup> However the conclusion they draw is different from what is suggested here. Power has not shifted from West to East (or, in Zakaria's wording, from the West to the Rest); rather power has diminished as coordination both within and between groups has faltered. The difficult negotiation of the Uruguay Round of the GATT was an early example; the moribund Doha Development Round of talks within the WTO shows progression along that

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<sup>10</sup> Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939*.

<sup>11</sup> Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*; Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939*.

<sup>12</sup> Friedman, *The World is Flat*; Zakaria, *The Post-American World*.

trend. Meanwhile, efforts to create parallel forms of coordination or go-it-alone strategies have fractured the original system. The evolution of the original Bretton Woods currency arrangement to the current monetary disorder is a good illustration. So too is the ‘spaghetti bowl’ of bilateral trade agreements that is inundating the old multilateral trading system.<sup>13</sup>

The change in the distribution of resources has not only reduced the quality of collective action but also made it possible for actors to express alternative types of power relationships – beyond those associated with the practice of leadership or deriving from the fruits of cooperation. The most obvious of these are blackmail within the regime or the creation of alternative arrangements outside the regime.

The notion of blackmail as power derives from the writings of Michel Crozier.<sup>14</sup> His argument is that power lies in control over uncertainty. Actors exploit the benefits of collective action by threatening to undermine or withhold them. Charles De Gaulle’s attack on the link between the dollar and gold is one illustration, the implicit threat that China will sell off its dollar-denominated reserve holdings is another. The list of cases could be expanded to include everything from nuclear proliferation to economic migration. The more complex the web of interdependence between countries, the more opportunities there are for individual countries to control uncertainty within the system.<sup>15</sup>

The creation of alternative arrangements is more complicated because it implies competing forms of collective action. The competition between rival capitalist and communist systems in the developing world was an obvious illustration of this dynamic, as was the attempt to create a ‘non-aligned’ new economic order between them. In the current context, the examples are found in OPEC, the BRICs, etc. But it can also be found in the transnational leasing of arable land, the purchase of minerals in the ground, or the pattern of Chinese investment in sub-Saharan Africa.

States are not the only actors to benefit from these new forms of power. Non-state actors have taken advantage of them as well. Transnational terrorist groups threaten to control uncertainty within the state system; transnational democracy movements strive to organise alternatives to existing state institutions. The global financial community illustrates both dimensions – first it creates a parallel financial universe seemingly disconnected from the real economy that drives the rest of the world; then, when that universe faces implosion, it demands assistance in order to prevent the real economy from devastation. Hence when policymakers call for regulation to prevent moral hazard, what they are hoping to prevent is giving blackmail power to institutions that are ‘too big to fail’.

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<sup>13</sup> Bhagwati, *Termites in the Trading System*.

<sup>14</sup> Crozier, *The Stalled Society*.

<sup>15</sup> The argument made in this and subsequent paragraphs is developed further in Jones, “Elusive Power, Essential Leadership”, 243–51; and Jones, “A Great Fall”, 177–82.

The redistribution of resources makes for a more disorderly world because even if self-anointed leading countries have the resources and proclivity to lead, other countries have less interest to follow and more opportunities to go it alone. The types of power used in the system are multiplied, but the power generated by collective action is diminished.

## **Implications**

Three implications derive from this understanding of power and leadership: friction increases, leaders are overstretched and negative externalities accumulate. These implications are obvious (and well known). The increasing friction can be measured by the length of time required to agree on collective responses; the overstretch takes place as leaders try to maintain their positions by increasing both incentives (public goods provision) and coercion; and externalities accumulate as the pattern of collective action becomes more inflexible, as routine maintenance of the system is ignored and as the unintended consequences of cooperation remain unaddressed.

The evolution of the United States' responses to state failure from Yugoslavia through Somalia to Afghanistan and Iraq are illustrative of this dynamic. The increasing friction within the Western alliance led to delayed or ineffective intervention. The US response was to shift toward ever narrower 'coalitions of the willing'. And the result was not only the over-commitment of America resources but also a lingering resentment within the West and the destabilisation of a region extending from the Middle East to the Indian subcontinent.

The security policy illustration is clear but the pattern can also be seen in the context of global macroeconomic imbalances.<sup>16</sup> Many top officials in the Obama administration have identified these imbalances as a cause of the economic and financial crisis. In September 2009, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner insisted that macroeconomic imbalances should be the focus for cooperation within the Group of 20 (G20). Far from resulting in decisive action, however, this insistence on tackling macroeconomic imbalances has only fuelled further divisions and indecisiveness within the G20 itself.

A third example might be environmental protection. The negotiation of the Kyoto Protocols was difficult. Their implementation was only partial and efforts to negotiate a follow-up agreement in Copenhagen were largely unsuccessful. The conversations between countries continue, but it is hard to see much evidence of progress. Meanwhile, greenhouse gases continue to accumulate in the atmosphere and the estimated cost of adjusting to higher temperatures continues to mount.

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<sup>16</sup>For an extended analysis of the problem of macroeconomic imbalances, see Jones, "New Political Economy of Macroeconomic Imbalances", 61–73.

The controversial point would be whether the United States was actually a ‘leader’ on this issue. Even if we assign ‘leadership’ to Europe, however, we can see much the same pattern of development.

Finally, it is worth considering how these implications of power and leadership play out alongside the pro-democracy movement in the Arab world. To begin with, there is a clear argument to be made that the democratisation of the Middle East creates conditions that are impossible for any one country to manage alone. Even when the subject is limited to a single subject like ethnic conflict, human rights violations, economic migration, energy security or Israel–Palestine, it is hard to see how a single country could play a decisive role. Once these lines of argument interact, the logic of collective response becomes inescapable.<sup>17</sup>

The point is to consider what the outcome will be if the international community is divided, if individual countries – the United States, Britain, France, China, Saudi Arabia – try to manage the political transformation of the Arab world, and if unintended consequences – lost incomes and opportunities, migration, crime, etc. – continue to mount. It is not hard to imagine this situation leading to a non-democratic outcome that is worse in many ways than what the Arab countries started with. This is clearly a scenario worth preventing both across the region and at the individual country level.

## Second-order constraints

Throwing money at the Arab world is not an option. The Obama administration simply does not have the resources at its disposal. Military engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq has resulted in an unprecedented degree of American war-weariness. When they met for their first major debate in New Hampshire, the contenders for the Republican Party’s presidential nomination were all competing to explain how they would put an end to foreign entanglements.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, President Obama has announced an accelerated draw-down of US foreign troop deployments.<sup>19</sup>

Budgetary debates in the United States underscore the limits to American resources as well. As Republicans and Democrats wrangle over how best to cure the government’s fiscal deficits, the market actors fear that political inattention to the need to raise the statutory debt ceiling will result in an unintended technical default. Meanwhile, every aspect of discretionary spending is under the

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<sup>17</sup> See Allin and Jones, “As Good as It Gets?”, 205–15.

<sup>18</sup> For a strong characterisation of the debate, see Republican Senator John McCain’s interview on ABC Television’s ‘This Week’ program, 19 June 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/week-transcript-sen-john-mccain/story?id=13869543>

<sup>19</sup> President Obama’s remarks “on the way forward in Afghanistan”, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-afghanistan>

microscope.<sup>20</sup> And even though foreign assistance amounts to less than one percent of the federal budget, the fact that it has so few domestic constituents means that the foreign assistance budget line will suffer significant cuts.

Such constraints are second-order because they derive at least in part from the accumulated weakness and ineffectiveness of American control over the international system. More efficient multilateral involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq would have relieved some of the strain on the US military; more solidarity in the world economy would have softened the impact of the financial crisis as well.

The United States is hardly alone in suffering from ever tighter financial constraints. Although most European countries do not approach US federal debt levels, they remain overcommitted. The reason lies in the ineffectiveness of European leadership, both nationally in those countries worst effected and in the European Union as a whole. The consequences are dramatic: the threat of a sovereign debt crisis on Europe's periphery threatens to stall the economic recovery and bring down the major European banks – and perhaps the single currency as well.

It is small wonder, then, that so few European countries committed forces to the Libyan engagement. As the trickle of migrants from North Africa to Europe threatens to transform into a flood, governments are eager to ring-fence their development assistance as well. Although there are clear arguments that such assistance can help stem the flow of migrants, the credibility of such arguments depends upon the belief that migration flows can be stemmed without the threat of force. International development assistance is only a long-term solution. In the short term, it is easier (and more expedient politically) simply to shut the border and shunt the burdens associated with international migration onto someone else.

### **Restarting collective action**

If countries cannot simply redeploy resources to aid the political transformation of the Arab world (or to end global warming, correct macroeconomic imbalances, rebuild failed states and restructure international trade and development), then there is little choice but to search for a cooperative solution.

The challenge is to restart collective action. This challenge is much greater than we might like to admit because it focuses attention on followers as well as leaders. Somehow, despite the redistribution of power resources in a changed global environment, followers must resist the temptation to defect from cooperation or to resort to blackmail.

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<sup>20</sup> See M. Tomasky, "The Budget Battles on which His Reelection Depends", *New York Review of Books*, 26 May 2011, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/may/26/budget-battles-which-his-reelection-depends/>

This is where Obama's point about 'real leadership' in the context of Libya becomes relevant. Any attempt by the United States to intervene independently would only intensify the strain on American resources. Should the United States insist on running the show, it would expose itself to blackmail or defection.

Hence the best choice is for the United States to create incentives for other countries to assume responsibility for the maintenance of collective action. An important part of such incentives is going to be allowing other countries to influence the precise definition of the goals. At best, the United States will serve its national interest by encouraging other countries to pursue their own. Ideally, it would make this specific intervention in Libya compatible with a broader collective response to the democratisation of the Arab world.

The success of this strategy depends heavily on the actions of the other countries involved. If the Obama administration wants to assume a 'real leadership' position, then it has to accept responsibility for the work of the 'real followers' as well. In other words, the Obama administration has to accept responsibility for political decisions made outside its direct control – and this is what makes most Americans uncomfortable. When John Kerry announced his commitment to a 'global test' of explaining the legitimacy of American actions to the rest of the world, he was immediately ridiculed for giving other countries an opportunity to question the US government's pursuit of its own national interest. Making US policy dependent on other countries' performance is even harder to swallow. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine a credible alternative. Even accepting that the Libyan intervention might not have been in America's national interest, it is clear that US foreign policy depends significantly on how much it can depend upon the cooperation of the rest of the world. Moreover, such interdependence has existed for decades; the current situation may be qualitatively different, but it is not categorically so.

This is why outgoing Defense Secretary Robert Gates' critique of NATO in his 10 June 2011 speech is so significant.<sup>21</sup> US Defense Secretaries have always complained about burden sharing within the alliance. As Gates himself admits, there is little new to say on that front. What is new is more implicit than explicit. The Obama administration has a lot staked on how well Europeans demonstrate the capacity to support America's leadership role. This is sure to sound strange to the Europeans themselves. Why should they be held responsible for the success or failure of the Obama administration's engagement with the outside world? Yet if Europeans prefer this new style of American global leadership to the more autonomous alternative, then the answer to that question is self-evident. The effectiveness of any leader is a function of the efforts of those who follow. And a leader without followers has little choice but to go it alone.

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<sup>21</sup> Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2011/06/10/transcript-of-defense-secretary-gatess-speech-on-natos-future/>

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