

Elusive Power, Essential Leadership

Erik Jones

I

The global economic crisis has everyone focused on the Great Depression. Not since the 1930s – or so we repeatedly read in the newspapers – has global finance seized up so quickly, growth slowed so sharply and unemployment risen so dramatically.¹ Such analogies are at best imprecise and a range of voices do dispute them.² Nevertheless, the parallels are close enough to brand a whole range of economic policies as lessons from the past.

The same is not true for foreign affairs. No matter how closely the economic situation mirrors conditions in the inter-war period, the political situation does not. Radical Islam is not fascism and neither Russian- nor Chinese-style authoritarianism bears any similarity to the communist threat. Robert Kagan may pause to celebrate the *Return of History and the End of Dreams*, but it is to herald a new ‘age of divergence’ and not to signal precise parallels with the past.³

To find an appropriate political analogy we should look to the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period when international turmoil coincided with a crisis of governability. Then, as now, America’s moral authority suffered the stigma of an unpopular war even as contradictions in the American economy contributed to the breakdown of global finance. This dual challenge to American hegemony coincided with a crisis in political legitimacy:

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across the globe, student protest, labour unrest and even political violence captured government attention at home even as political leaders sought to adapt to the changing structure of relations abroad. The old certainties of the Cold War crumbled and writers began to speculate about the future of the West.

The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed an important flourishing of the study of power beyond the traditional notions of the classical realist period. Where classical realists like E.H. Carr or Hans J. Morgenthau focused on the exercise of power as a function of wealth and capabilities,⁴ the writers of the late 1960s and early 1970s were more concerned with the possibility that groups without obvious endowments could nevertheless force changes to the status quo. Traditional concepts of power were set aside in favour of new relational notions that underscored the importance of managing interdependence, manipulating uncertainty and redefining the possible in a changed world.

These relational concepts of power are increasingly important today. With all the talk of hard power and soft power, smart power and network power, we risk losing sight of the dynamics that emerge when politics collapses into disorder.⁵ A reconsideration of the 1970s not only helps us better understand events as they unfold in the current crisis, but also forces us to reconsider the appropriate balance between American leadership and the international rule of law.

II

The usual presumption is that if one country gets another to do something it otherwise would not do, or prevents it from doing something it otherwise would, the explanation can be traced to some attribute of the country in charge: the strength of its army, the wealth of its economy, or the hold it has over public opinion or the popular imagination. This is the spectrum of power that runs from the coercive hard to the attractive soft, covering all points in between. Moreover, the attributes are not exclusive and the list is never exhaustive. Countries can have many attributes in combination and they can develop new ones, such as extensive social networks, dynamic markets, effective schools and creative universities. Finally, politicians can

use national resources poorly or they can use them well; they can squander their power assets or they can be smart.

The key feature in this presumption is that power is something that countries possess or can develop. Power belongs to countries by dint of their resources and, so long as we can take the structure of relations between countries for granted, the distribution of resources should offer a good guide as to how conflicts between countries will work out.

The presumption that power lies in attributes is less useful when some countries play by one set of rules while others do not, or when a broadly binding set of rules either stops functioning or breaks down. The distribution of power resources does not provide a good guide to the behaviour of rogue states, reckless states or states that tolerate or even support the terrorists, warlords, insurrectionists, pirates, drug cartels and other criminals who challenge the security of many parts of the world. We can guess what they might be doing, but it is harder to characterise it as 'rational' and easier to scoff that it is not.

In a context where the structure of relationships between countries cannot be taken for granted, a new set of presumptions about the nature of power comes into play. Resources still matter, but relationships matter more. Consider the problem of interdependence. When Richard Cooper set out his analysis of *The Economics of Interdependence* in the late 1960s, he explained how even the government responsible for managing the world's largest economy could only achieve its policy objectives by taking the actions of its major partners into account. Hence national policymakers faced a choice: either they could learn to work together with their counterparts in other countries, or they would have to scale back on their country's relations with the world economy as a whole.⁶

Cooperation is never easy, but it is more effective than trying to go it alone and more durable than trying to compel others. This is the central insight in Hannah Arendt's work *On Violence*. Arendt uses the notion of violence to distinguish between power and coercion. Her basic point is that power lies in collective action: 'The extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All'. What she reveals with this distinction is the importance of legitimacy and acceptance – not

for any given actor or groups of actors, but for the underlying rules of the game. Actors do not possess power by dint of their resources, rather they are 'empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name'. Once this group withdraws its support, the power itself withers away.⁷

The disappearance of power is not the only problem the loss of legitimacy or acceptance represents; relations can be manipulated as well. This was emphasised by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye in their study of *Power and Interdependence*. What they add to the discussion is a distinction between the sensitivity and vulnerability of actors to any change in their relationships with others. They argue that countries are sensitive insofar as they can be affected by a change in the relationship and vulnerable insofar as they lack the means to escape any adverse effects.⁸ Both sensitivity and vulnerability are characteristic features of states, but these characteristics are different from the power resources sketched in the classical realist sense. They create new opportunities for the 'strong' to come under the influence of the 'weak'.

The weak are often quick to exploit the potential to manipulate relations in order to influence the strong: this is the central claim made by Michel Crozier in his study of *The Stalled Society*. Crozier agrees with Arendt that power emanates from acceptance of the rules of the game, but he points out that actors can also influence events by breaking the rules to take advantage of the resulting uncertainty. What is more, Crozier notes that rule-breakers can garner a certain toleration or acceptance of their own, effectively rewriting the rules to suit their own purposes. What starts as blackmail gradually becomes a normal part of the game.⁹

Acceptance is not the only currency of power; imagination also plays a role. If we agree that power is a function of both resources and relationships, then we greatly expand the possibilities for interaction beyond any easily observable distribution of resources. The exercise of power becomes as much a question of recognising what is possible as having the wherewithal to match ends to means. Steven Lukes emphasises the importance of such agenda-setting in his short pamphlet *Power: A Radical View*.¹⁰ He underscores the potential for a revolution in the structure of relationships well beyond the incremental changes that manipulation or blackmail may

bring at the margin. By controlling the agenda, the weak can push the strong in a whole new direction.

III

Much of the current speculation about the future, like that pursued by writers such as Robert Kagan and Fareed Zakaria (or business analysts at Goldman Sachs), is that power will follow the growth in relative wealth and population.¹¹ The gist of the argument is that current trends will not lead to a total eclipse of the United States, but will result in its relative decline. And the preliminary evidence in terms of trade, investment and short-term capital flows suggests that the argument has merit, at least in broad terms.

What such speculation does not reveal is how a new global order will emerge from the present crisis. This is where the insights from the 1970s become important. Consider again the logic of interdependence. George W. Bush could come into office at the turn of the century with a strong commitment to American unilateralism. He could turn his back on the Kyoto Protocol for the reduction of greenhouse-gas emissions, the Anti-Ballistic Missile accord, and the International Criminal Court, without much concern for how foreign reactions to his positions would impact on the effectiveness of US policy. Barack Obama cannot afford the same luxury. He has to worry about how other countries react to American efforts to shore up the big US banks, just as he has to recognise that international cooperation will enhance the effectiveness of US economic policy.

This problem of interdependence has become pressing in other areas as well, from energy security to environmental protection, and from international terrorism (in the Middle East and Central Asia) to organised crime (in Mexico and Latin America) to piracy (in the Indian Ocean). No matter how many resources the United States is willing to throw at any of these problems, no solution will be forthcoming unless other state actors come along. Moreover, their essential cooperation cannot be compelled if it is to be meaningful, or at least any more meaningful than Pakistan's efforts to contain nuclear proliferation or stop the Taliban.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration has to be on the lookout for countries or other actors who seek to exploit any vulnerabilities that

present themselves. The pirates in the Indian Ocean are a good example. Their business model is built on the recognition that it is easier to pay the occasional ransom than to re-route freight traffic around the Horn of Africa. As a result, they not only pursue their trade with impunity but may have even come to regard it as accepted practice, which partly explains why the pirates responded so angrily to the forceful liberation of Captain Richard Phillips.

Where the pirates exploit state vulnerability, the North Koreans and Iranians engage in varying degrees of blackmail, breaking the rules to take advantage of the resulting uncertainty. The North Korean case is the most acute: by timing their missile test to coincide with the G20 summit they forced the Obama administration to focus its attention on their concerns. The Iranian case is more subtle; they do not need to demonstrate such an obvious threat in order to raise doubts and attract attention. Whether their goal is domestic legitimation, regional intimidation or international independence, they are unwilling to abide by America's interpretation of the rules of the game.

What we lack is a clear vision of how to reconcile such competing ambitions in a way that promotes a stable and effective pattern of international cooperation. There is a lot of talk of promoting the G20 in lieu of the G8, reforming the United Nations Security Council, and redesigning the voting rules for the International Monetary Fund, but there is little sense of how this somehow constitutes a coherent global framework. Indeed, apart from the G20 perhaps replacing the G8, it is hard to see how these other changes could come about. Most of the existing global institutions (and the Security Council in particular) are hostage to the vested interests of the key actors who benefit from existing arrangements. They are thus even harder to reform than they are to do without. Of course international institutions are hardly unique in this regard; domestic institutions are difficult to reform as well. The fact that the problem is a general one, however, only deepens the challenge of finding a way out.¹²

The mistake is to presume that international law by itself is somehow the answer. Law is useful as a means of structuring relations between countries just as between individuals. But the usefulness of the law is itself

a function of its acceptance. More importantly, the law by itself cannot tell us how to reform existing structures once that acceptance breaks down. When the law ceases to function, it is leadership that matters.

This is the dilemma that Theodore J. Lowi confronted in his analysis of *The Politics of Disorder*. Lowi wrote this book as a sequel to his more famous *End of Liberalism* to emphasise the importance he attaches to the equality that is only possible under the rule of law. The 'disorder' of the title describes the special case when people become disillusioned with politics because of the consequences when institutions fail. The only recourse is to leadership, which Lowi viewed as the opposite of law. Lowi feared the inequity and unpredictability inherent in political leadership, yet he acknowledged that 'institutionalized change sounds like a contradiction in terms' and recognised 'the iron law of decadence' that encourages self-interested actors to block any effort at institutional reform. Leadership is the corrective even if law should be the norm. The challenge, therefore, is to find some balance in the relationship between leadership and the law.¹³

The current debate about the use of extreme interrogation techniques underscores the difficulty of the task at hand. The photographs of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib discredited the George W. Bush administration in the eyes of much of the world and has provided a powerful tool in the recruitment of terrorists to attack the interests of the United States. The slow drip of information and images coming out of Guantanamo Bay only made matters worse. Hence it is no surprise that the Obama administration made the closure of Guantanamo a priority upon entering office. Despite the impressiveness of the symbolism involved, however, the reassurance of the rest of the world was not so easily won. Pundits and commentators have parsed the new president's comments to see how committed he is to the abolition of torture as an international norm. The release of memoranda used to justify the Bush administration's policies has not relieved the ambiguity, even if critics of Obama's decision to release the memoranda worry that he has tied his administration's hands by doing so. Voices on the left argue that only a prosecution of Bush administration officials can show the Obama administration's commitment to the rule of law.

The challenge of balancing leadership and the rule of law is not limited to domestic politics or security matters; it plays out at the international level and in other policy domains.¹⁴ Finding a response to the current economic crisis is a good example. The Obama administration must not only set the agenda for reform, but also win acceptance both for its policy programme and its self-appointed leadership role. Coming up with a coherent agenda is hard enough. Although there are a number of excellent ideas circulating, it is difficult to see how they come together to form a coherent new economic world order. Finding acceptance will be even harder. Certainly it would be a mistake to assume that the overwhelming military and economic resources of the United States will be enough to underwrite any new agenda or that American leadership can be taken for granted. The tests that Obama has confronted during his first 100 days in office reveal not just the extent of the challenge but also the many dimensions of power in an increasingly disordered world.

Notes

- 1 Such reporting gained particular prominence when it could be traced back to the International Monetary Fund's *World Economic Outlook*. See, for example, Jeannine Aversa, 'Global Recession Worst Since Depression, IMF Says', *The Huffington Post*, 22 April 2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/04/22/global-economy-may-shrink_n_190165.html.
- 2 Bartle Bull, 'No, He Can't', *Prospect*, April 2009, p. 60.
- 3 Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (London: Atlantic Books, 2008) p. 4.
- 4 E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919–1939* (London: PaperMac, 2nd ed., 1995 [1946]), pp. 97–134; Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2nd ed., 1958 [1954]), pp. 93–152.
- 5 The notion of 'soft power' is most closely associated with Joseph Nye, who develops it in part at least in order to overcome the paradox that arises when 'people define power as synonymous with the resources that produce it' (p. 3). Nevertheless, when he discusses the sources of soft power, it is clear that his is a resource-based understanding of power as well. See Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), pp. 11–15. For 'smart power' see Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, Jr, *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America* (Washington DC: CSIS, 2007); and for 'network

- power' see 'America's Edge: Power in a Networked Century', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 1, January–February 2009, pp. 94–113.
- ⁶ Richard N. Cooper, *The Economics of Interdependence: Economic Policy in the Atlantic Community* (New York: McGraw-Hill for the Council on Foreign Relations, 1968), pp. 260–64.
- ⁷ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), pp. 42–4.
- ⁸ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (New York: Longman, 3rd ed., 2001 [1977]), pp. 9–17, 196.
- ⁹ Michel Crozier, *The Stalled Society* (New York: Viking, 1974 [1970]), pp. 19–36.
- ¹⁰ Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 1974).
- ¹¹ Kagan, *Return of History*; Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008); Dominic Wilson and Roopa Purushothaman, *Dreaming with BRICs: The Path to 2050*, Global Economics Paper No. 99 (New York: Goldman Sachs, 2003); Goldman Sachs Economics Group, *BRICs and Beyond* (New York: Goldman Sachs, 2007).
- ¹² See, for example, Lester Thurow, *The Zero-Sum Society: Distribution and the Possibilities for Economic Change* (New York: Penguin, 1981 [1980]); Mancur Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982).
- ¹³ Theodore J. Lowi, *The Politics of Disorder* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971).
- ¹⁴ See, for example, G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Forging a World of Liberty under Law: U.S. National Security in the 21st Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Project on National Security, 2006).

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