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## **The Dubious Leader: USA in the Wake of Recent Developments**

“Just as Rome, Venice and the British Empire in their time, America today is the principal global organizer, a superpower which drives the world forward, a force for balance which stands in the way of anarchy”, wrote Robert D. Kaplan, a leading American journalist, in 2003. A question worth asking is whether the statement holds true to this day. Has the United States retained its status as a dominant global superpower whose consent and backing are required for anything ever to happen in the world? Is its impact on resolving key global political, economic and social problems disproportionately heavy? Does it continue to set standards and values?

To say that America's role in the world was debated repeatedly at various times in contemporary history is hardly an exaggeration. The United States gained momentum in the late 1980s and the early 1990s after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union. The big questions asked at the time concerned the need for America's presence in the new post-cold-war world which seemed to be “devoid of history”, liberal, democratic and free of conflict and war. The subsequent wars in Kuwait and the Balkans soon proved wrong a claim to that effect made by Francis Fukuyama. Whether it wanted it or not, America assumed the role of the sole superpower serving as “the world policeman”. Not only was this old and new role of America unquestioned - it also appeared to be the paradigm of the post-cold-war international order and its integral part. While some stressed that this role does not need to be eternal, no one contemplated the end of *Pax Americana*, not even in the remote future.

The debate on the global role and significance of the United States was resumed towards the end of the first decade of this century. Only a few years earlier, a question on whether or not the world dominance of the United States was in decline would seem purely theoretical. The perception that such dominance might be at risk resulted from the damage done to the country's status under the Bush Presidency. Although American power at the close of Bush's term of office remained significant in absolute terms with the U.S. continually building its military capabilities and the American economy remaining the world's strongest and most competitive (USA's GDP of \$14 trillion was still ten times that of Russia's) despite certain early signs of trouble observed at the time, the America's primacy was being challenged, especially in the realm of politics. Reasons for that included, among others, controversial actions by the Bush administration which violated the existing rules of international order, weakening the undeniable strengths of the U.S., i.e. its use of soft power and moral strength. Appreciation for such strengths was increasingly replaced by aversion or even hatred towards Washington. The result was an unprecedented drop in the prestige of the United States and a decay of its international significance, also within the trans-Atlantic community. Equally compromised was the United States' ability to influence global affairs and resolve international issues.

Scores of publications appeared at the time portending the end of America's supremacy. Their authors suggested that the U.S. had wasted away a great deal of its prestige predicting this would lead to the emergence of a post-American world of multipolar order reigned by alternative powers. They also postulated that while the United States was forced to compete with other powers in the geopolitical scene, its role did not necessarily have to diminish further to the point of America's agonizing "dehegemonisation". Nothing is predetermined. Nevertheless, although faced with a serious challenge of the strength of his country being sapped, its new president would still be in a position to prevent the country's decline. He could succeed as long as he was willing to act, had the ability to act efficiently and employed the right means to achieve his goals. In other words, the new president needs the vision, courage, talents and authority to restore America's strong position and face up to the challenges of a world headed towards multipolarity.

These are precisely the requirements put to Barack Obama in January 2009 when he assumed the office of President. His "Yes, we can!" electoral slogan seemed to suggest he was well prepared to rise to the challenge. Nearly euphoric support from millions of Americans and enthusiastic global reception put strong trump cards in the President's hands at the very start of his first term. Were the hopes realized and did Obama indeed succeed in restoring America's international clout and credibility in addition to delivering on his many other electoral promises? Can one, in the light of recent developments involving the U.S.



domestic problems and international issues, speak today of the United States having regained its international position, becoming effective in its actions and skillful in problem-solving? Did the way in which the U.S. dealt with the Syrian crisis boost its image as an unwavering and effective power? What can the world say about a state and an administration whose partisan politics bring it to the brink of bankruptcy causing a temporary shutdown of its offices and agencies? And, last but not least, what is the effect on the U.S. image in the world, especially among its closest European allies, of all the successive surveillance scandals, particularly the most recent of them involving spying on the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and, as is most likely, other officials?

What can be said about America after close to five years under Obama's rule? Judging by the current global position and role of the United States and, in particular, its relations with its allies and partners, the picture is ridden by ambiguity and certainly far from being all good. Although the Syria decisions, which helped the U.S. shun an armed intervention, may be considered well-advised, as they have prevented adding further victims to what already was a very bloody conflict, there is another aspect to it that comes to the forefront. One cannot but agree with the opinions that the course of action adopted by the United States, and specifically its initial referral to Congress followed by a round of diplomatic wrangling with Russia, eroded the credibility of the United States and its President. Obama displayed glaring inconsistency and disturbing indecisiveness. His request for congressional approval for a military strike in Syria was not only a show of weakness, helplessness and spinelessness on the part of the American leader who dreaded the response of the American public which was generally opposed to military interventions. On the contrary, Obama's attempt to shift the responsibility to Congress was designed to generate excuses and, more than anything else, established precedence. This conclusion is supported by the fact that, suddenly, America allowed Russia to become the main player in the Syrian game. "Acting in plain view of the world, the U.S. President deliberately forsook some of his authority. He admitted he was not in a position to make the decision singlehandedly and allowed Putin to have his say at a time when the latter continued to gain international significance", suggested an expert of the Washington-based German Marshall Fund. It is difficult to differ with his opinion.

America's unprecedented wavering in its decision to intervene and prevent a humanitarian disaster as glaring is that in Syria, in which no vital American interests were at stake, is extremely dangerous. It is an expression of isolationism, a sentiment seated deeply in the American mind, strengthened by controversial interventions in Afghanistan and, even more so, those in Iraq (as many as 38 percent of Americans, that is more than ever since 1947, want America to stop meddling with world affairs). "This nation is sick and tired of war",



said Obama, quoting a letter from an American war veteran. This is certainly the case and understandably so. However, a leader of a state which, despite all arguments to the contrary, is nevertheless considered to be an indispensable anchor of the world order, who allows such considerations to weigh heavily on his decisions, runs the risk of not only jeopardizing the international status and rank of his country but also, and even more so, puts the entire global order at considerable risk. "If you didn't like the old world in which the U.S. regularly intervened, just see how you will like the new one in which it does not", wrote the British historian and publicist Timothy Garton Ash.

The recent budget crisis in Washington certainly did not help America maintain its strength on the international arena. By refusing to adopt the national budget, the Republican majority in the House of Representatives not only caused Federal offices and various other institutions to shut down for over a dozen days forcing thousands of federal employees on compulsory leaves but also strongly undermined confidence in America, tarnishing its image as a superbly efficient and well-managed state. As a matter of fact, the United States had been a model democracy from its very conception and used its reputation as such to build up its powerful world position and might. Being a model democracy has become part of America's famous mission in history vis-à-vis the rest of the world and other nations. In October, the United States, which already struggled with its undermined international image, officially became a "dysfunctional" state. The development had its precedence in 1995 when Bill Clinton was confronted with similar circumstances. Yet, at that time, the problem was faced by an administration whose status as a superpower remained unchallenged. The world saw Bill Clinton's dispute with the Republican Congress as a purely domestic inter-partisan affair rather than contributing to the weakening of America. The current difficulties with the financing of federal spending forced Obama to cancel his Asian visit, which not only puts a question mark over the effectiveness and significance of the U.S. turnaround to the Pacific, as announced in 2011, but also, and even more so, constitutes a concession to China, which is America's main competitor in the Region.

What discredited the United States even more internationally was the threat of its bankruptcy in the wake of the withdrawal of approval to increase the public debt ceiling. While opinions on the possible impact this might have on America itself as well as the global economy were divided, the public perception of the message it sent around the world was clearly negative. The international opinion did not really care who would emerge as winner in the dispute, who would lose, whether the president and the democrats would succeed in strengthening their positions domestically or whether the Republicans would disgrace themselves even further. The U.S. allies and adversaries agreed in their conclusion that the U.S. had shamed itself, its authorities and political bodies and lost its credibility.



Seen in this context, the wiretapping scandal should be viewed as a major loss in America's credibility internationally. The escape to Russia of a former analyst employed at the U.S. National Security Agency alone delivered a heavy blow, undermining the prestige of U.S. intelligence services. The inner workings of the U.S. intelligence and diplomatic services were again exposed to public view just as before in the case of U.S. diplomatic cables being leaked on the Internet. Can anything disgrace a state and its agencies more than a "major intelligence leak"?

However, the most severe damage to the image of the U.S. resulted from the assessment of these events by the European allies (the impact on US-German relations requires separate treatment). Reportedly, the surveillance involved not only Chancellor Angela Merkel but also other European leaders. "You don't do such things to your friends", could be heard from European politicians. And while it is difficult to vouch that none of the various other agencies, including those based in Europe, resort to any such means, the fact that America rather than any other country was caught in the act, subjected the United States to widespread criticism discrediting it in European eyes. Paradoxically, all these events unfolded during the Presidency of Obama, of all people, the president who raised high hopes in Europe for ending America's Bush-era hypocrisy and arrogance by returning to the use of soft power in its diplomacy and, more than anything else, restoring mutual trust and true partnership in trans-Atlantic relations. All enthusiasts of the black president will now be forced to swallow a bitter pill. This may put even more distance between European leaders and the U.S. President who, incidentally, has failed to establish close emotional ties with any of them or at least to match the kind of relationships seen between the harshly criticized George Bush and Chancellor Angela Merkel or the British Prime Minister Tony Blair. This has been admitted even by U.S. commentators and seconded by German journalists, including those of *Der Spiegel*.

Opinions similar to those directed at the Bush Administration, who was criticized for having wasted a great deal of support and solidarity which the U.S. enjoyed after 9/11, are now being voiced regarding Obama and his team, despite the enthusiastic welcome given to him in Europe five years earlier. As to trans-Atlantic relations, attempts to give them new momentum have failed while America's previously keen interest in the European Continent has waned. As a matter of fact, all of Obama's visits to the Old World have been short, few and far between. What is more, an irresistible feeling arose that the two worlds were drifting ever farther apart. The eavesdropping scandal will certainly not help reverse the trend. What it may do is hamper negotiations on creating a joint free trade agreement (the so called economic NATO) which had raised so many hopes. A great deal of time and effort, especially in Washington, will be needed to restore confidence and make amends.



Seen in the context of America's global leadership, the developments of recent weeks inescapably suggest the conclusion that the post-American world order is more imminent than ever expected. This is not to say by any means that the new world is going to be better or safer. On the contrary, it may well turn out to be worse. That is why the latest case of discrediting the United States domestically and internationally should be treated with utmost concern.

The theses included in this text express the opinions of the author only.

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