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Chapter 13: Reclaiming U.S. Leadership of the Free World

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During the Cold War, the U.S. was the unquestioned leader of the free world. Alliances were built around that leadership. The international economic order was based on Bretton Woods institutions, developed and led by the U.S. The U.S.'s status in the U.N. Security Council, the OECD, the G-7, etc, further formalized its status as the indispensable nation. Even those living under governments outside of the free world – whether in the Baltics, Eastern Europe, Latin America, or Afghanistan – looked to the U.S. for leadership.

The end of the Cold War represented not only a victory for American leadership, but also marked a search for a new *raison d'être* for American foreign policy. No serious politician or commentator suggested isolation, so the debate was over the extent of American leadership and engagement in the world. Who would the U.S. lead, and to where? Richard Haass proposed the role of “sheriff,” in which the U.S. would put together *ad hoc* coalitions or “posses” to deal with specific problems, rather than relying on unilateral action or international institutions. Samuel Huntington argued that the new international order would be defined by civilizational clashes and that American foreign policy should be oriented towards leading “the West” in such a world. The neoconservative / nationalist alliance that emerged during the last Bush administration defined leadership as starting with unilateral action by the U.S. and having “coalitions of the willing” follow thereafter.

Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the debate continues. American unilateralism has been seriously discredited, the United Nations has become more of a forum for challenging American leadership rather than establishing American leadership, international financial institutions have to be restructured because of the present economic crisis, and NATO continues to struggle with its identity given that the original threat that inspired its creation (the Soviet Union) has dissolved.

Despite this uncertainty, the U.S. needs allies and coalitions more than ever. The global challenges confronting the U.S today – energy security, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, failed states – forced the American foreign policy establishment to engage on more fronts than it ever has had to before. These are not challenges that only the U.S. faces. Just as the U.S. needs the world more than ever, the world needs the U.S. Indeed, one can argue that these challenges have not been more effectively confronted because the U.S. has not found its proper leadership role in the post-Cold War world. A new national security strategy must answer the “wh” questions – *who* are we leading and *where* are we leading them to?

In answering the question of *who*, we must keep in mind that as a superpower, the United States will always have both allies and adversaries. Yet the behavior of some countries defies such neat categories. There are countries that adopt adversarial positions *vis a vis* the United States on some issues, but cooperate on other ones. There are countries that are formally allies but have differed from us – and the alliance in general – on national security issues.

It is therefore instructive to categorize countries in five groupings. The first, *friends*, should include those nations that are not only formally aligned, but share similar values (i.e., liberal capitalist democracies), and are committed to an international order similar to the one the U.S. established/led after World War II. This group would be primarily Western, but could include Japan and South Korea, both of which fit the above criteria. The second grouping could be most properly considered *allies*. It would be made up almost entirely of emerging democracies and markets, with different relationships and history with the United States. Some of these conditional allies may occasionally clash with the United States in a fundamental manner. Classic examples of conditional allies are India – the world’s largest democracy, which after years of non-alignment and then a decade of tension with the U.S. over its nuclear status, has established its warmest relations with the U.S. ever; Turkey – a NATO ally and EU aspirant, which at the same time has strained the alliance by clashing with the U.S. at key moments (denying the northern front in the latest Iraq war, and being supportive both of Ahmadinejad and Iran’s nuclear aspirations); and Brazil – South America’s most significant emerging market and democracy, which has also taken positions on Iran and Western Hemisphere issues that vex American foreign policy. The third group is made up of *competitors*. These are definitely not friends, but they are not always foes. This grouping would include China, Egypt, Russia, and Saudi Arabia. These are countries with which we compete for influence, resources, and other key national priorities, but whom we often need for various reasons (such as to finance our deficits, to provide oil, to help stem nuclear proliferation). The final two groups are made up of clear *adversaries and enemies* – countries like Iran, Libya, Sudan, North Korea, and Cuba. There are few shared values or interdependence, and the strategic posture of these states challenges the international order the United States tries to preserve.

It is this international order that answers the *where* question. The world is interdependent to an unprecedented degree. Turmoil in America’s financial markets sparks a global economic downturn. Failure to address disease in the Third World leads to pandemics everywhere else. Pollution by the world’s biggest economies can lead to tsunamis, lack of water, and destructive

climate change in the world's poorest countries. Civil wars can lead to failed states and terrorist havens from which attacks around the globe can be launched. A decade into the new millennium, we know one thing for certain – there is no longer an “over there.”

U.S. leadership is needed to reestablish an international order that is defined by *security* – economic, humanitarian, environmental, and military. There are significant flaws in present international institutions and significant obstacles to reform. So, to borrow slightly from Richard Haass, the U.S. may have to undertake the role of sheriff, but instead of assembling *ad hoc* posses, it should permanently “deputize” other nations to help keep order in the 21st century Wild West. This begins with renewing our relationships with our *friends*. The global enthusiasm over the election of President Obama, France’s reentering of NATO, and the EU’s selection of very low-key players for its first President and Foreign Minister shows that the conditions are still there for the U.S. to be the undisputed leader of the free world. What is left to prove to our *allies* is that we are ready to **lead** rather than to dictate. At the same time, all efforts should be made to further integrate *conditional allies* – with immediate emphasis on India – and take them to the next level. There is probably no viable plan to turn our *competitors* into reliable allies in the short term, but great focus should be placed on areas of collaboration with those states, and should avoid unnecessary and provocative disputes over issues of marginal importance to our national security. Finally, as the U.S. establishes the framework for greater cooperation with the vast majority of states, it can lead to effective containment, isolation, and perhaps regime evolution or change in the states that remain our *adversaries*, or even more critically, our *enemies*.

This much is clear: without coordinated international action, the global economy will sputter along, Iran will get nuclear weapons, international terrorism will never be defeated, climate change will worsen, and we will continuously be haunted by the threat of pandemics. Only the United States is in the position to *lead*, and the Obama Administration must take the occasion of the National Security Strategy Of The United States to lay out a vision that inspires others to follow.