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Power and Leadership: Recognizing (and Appreciating) the Difference by Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman

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Any discussion of US foreign policy begins with an understanding and appreciation of American 'power' and influence in an evolving and uncertain world. The conversation often starts with the assertion that the US is "the indispensable nation" as President Obama insisted in the candidates' foreign policy debate last week. But the debate about US power and purpose glosses over the more important issue – that of leadership. While considerable ink has been spilled over the first two items, precious little attention has been given to the third. In fact, the tendency is to conflate them and to assume that power is leadership. That sort of reasoning is lazy, wrong, and dangerous. We need to explore the meaning of leadership on its own terms if a discussion of US power is to bear fruit.

This conversation has assumed greater importance in Asia as the US embraces foreign and security policies that put the region at the top of the list of US priorities. While this discussion has been ongoing for over a decade, it has intensified as Asian officials and analysts witness firsthand the rise of China, and watch with no small amount of exasperation the spectacle of Washington Beltway politics. US interlocutors have done their best to counter and quiet Asian concerns about US distraction and disengagement. We believe that sanity is just around the corner; after the election, US politicians will likely strike a deal that stabilizes the US fiscal situation and provides reassurance that America's "rebalancing" toward Asia is not a hollow promise.

But for all the hyperventilation about a budget deal, that will address just one element -- and a small one at that -- of a much larger issue: the nature of American power and leadership in the 21st century.

Let's be clear: by just about any measure, the US remains the most powerful nation on the planet. Its military remains superior by orders of magnitude to that of any competitor. Even if sequestration becomes a fact, the US military budget would remain larger than any other – and most others combined. The second most capable military in Asia lags far behind, and that military, at least in terms of naval and air power, is a US ally, Japan. (If choosing sides for a ground war, the South Korean Army would be our first pick.) China, by its own admission, remains decades behind, its (1980s-vintage) aircraft carrier deployment and defense modernization effort notwithstanding.

For all the difficulties of the last few years, the US economy remains twice as large as China, number two, and on a per capita basis the PRC won't catch up for decades – if ever. The US remains the source of innovation and entrepreneurial energy, churning out profits, patents, and Nobel prize winners with regularity. Most importantly, the US remains the destination of choice for students seeking a top-ranked education and the freedom to use that education to better themselves and the world. No country can match the US for the geographic scope of its interests, the depth of human and economic contacts, or the reach of the instruments of either state power or soft power.

And yet for all that power and influence, one vital fact remains: the US cannot dictate international outcomes. Americans (and others) may fancy ourselves a global policeman or the "indispensable power," but our ability to construct solutions to foreign policy problems is – and, in truth, for decades now has been -- much more limited. We have a tendency to emphasize strength, when the real issue is leadership. There is a simple way to differentiate between them: strength is the ability to blow things up; it takes leadership to build something in its place.

Unfortunately, we have blurred the two concepts. That made some sense during the Cold War, when hard power -- strength – was the defining element of a world bifurcated into two competing camps. Today, international relations are much more complicated, with virtually all countries engaging in both cooperation and competition. Even North and South Korea do business with each other. Alignments and coalitions shift according to the issue and rarely do disagreements rise to the level of outright conflict.

In this environment, there is a premium on the ability to rally other countries -- to cajole, convince, or coopt other governments to get on board. This demands another skill set. Hard power – the traditional measure of strength – is of limited utility.

Exercising leadership has always been difficult, but has become even more challenging with the return of Asia. The old world – the transatlantic order – rested on a common culture. For all their differences, Americans and Europeans had shared understandings of history and the ideal international order (the basic element of which was the fact that they created it at a particular time in their own development and history).

While Asian nations have benefitted from that order, they had little, if any, say in its creation. Not surprisingly, they now rightfully demand a seat at the table of international negotiations. They represent a growing share of international wealth and they are expected to contribute more to resolving international issues. Often, those problems are found in their neighborhood, meaning they have a stake in their resolution.

The presumption that they will automatically endorse US solutions and actions, no matter how seemingly self-evident they are to Americans, is presumptuous.

Note that we said "Asians," not Chinese. Yes, China is now a major actor in Asia and globally (more on this shortly). But Asia is more than China. Japan remains the world's third-largest economy. India is emerging. Indonesia, South Korea, and others have earned a more prominent place not only regionally but globally. In conversations with us, they argue forcefully for a continued US presence and commitment to the region, but none wants to be told what to do or how to do it.

This is one of the least understood elements in US relations with Asia: while many, if not most, of these governments and publics want the US deeply engaged in their region, they want it on their terms. We need to engage those governments, understand their perspectives, and respect their prerogatives and priorities. We need to find the common language that allows us to discuss shared concerns and forge concerted action that still respects Asian sensitivities.

Topping that list of Asian concerns is the desire to avoid being forced to choose between the US and China. In truth, no one – at least no one in official Washington – is asking them to. Every US pronouncement about its Asia policy includes a caveat that these policies are not aimed at China and that the region is big enough for both countries.

Indeed, it has been US policy, at least since Richard Nixon, not to contain or hold China back, but to help China rise. The US (and Japan, Europe, and others) have invested billions in China in the belief that an interdependent China will be a force for peace and stability over the long run. If China steers itself in the other direction, it will be due to Beijing's motives, not those of the West. Campaign chest-pounding aside, both Democratic and Republican administrations alike have seen the value in a policy of constructive engagement with China because it is in everyone's interest that Beijing ultimately be part of the solution to the region's problems rather than an underlying cause.

The US possesses the tools necessary to forge constructive, all-inclusive coalitions in Asia, but getting the desired results takes patience. The benefits are worth the investment. Occasionally, it even gets it right. For example, a staple of the Obama administration security policy has been a reduction of the role of nuclear weapons in the defense of the US and its allies. This has been a potentially jarring development for Asian allies who have been told for years that those weapons were essential to the credulity of the US extended deterrent.

Rather than impose our policy on our allies – a blunder the US has committed in the past – the Obama administration went to great lengths when developing its Nuclear Posture Review to engage both Seoul and Tokyo to hear and respond to their concerns. Rather than damage our alliances, this has instead helped strengthen our security partnerships in a dangerous region.

Concerted dialogue with our allies on the official and unofficial levels has allayed those fears and ensured that the US and its partners speak with a single voice on a critical issue to their and our national defense. A similar process of engagement has driven US policy toward Southeast Asia and the results – ratification of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, creation of a US ambassador to ASEAN, and more robust participation in ASEAN-led regional institutions -- have pushed those relationships to new highs

Doing the right thing is only half the battle. Doing it the right way also matters. That's leadership; that's real strength.

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