

AFTER THE ECONOMIC CRISIS THE US COULD FIND ITSELF STRONGER THAN BEFORE

“The US has the potential in the middle-long term to regain much of the economic power lost in the last years”.

This is one of the interesting views expressed by Robin Niblett, Director of Chatham House, interviewed on the Obama administration’s perspectives and the role of US leadership in a changing world.

Dr. Niblett, Chatham House is going to publish the report “A question of leadership: rethinking America’s role in a changed world”. In what ways will the Obama administration rethink the American international leadership?

The new administration has made clear that the US shall recapture the global leadership it held in the past. Ultimately, global stability and security are best served, and maybe are possible only, with American leadership. However, our report ([**link ultimo articolo marrone**](#)) explains that it will be difficult for the US to recapture the same leadership enjoyed until 2001, even with as charismatic a president as Obama. The world has changed and many global trends that limit US leadership are taking place, thus it is not possible to simply go back to the past.

You suggest a shift of the current international order towards a multipolar one. Do you perceive the EU as a likely pole of the future multipolar world? In that sense, would the EU be more a competitor or an ally of the US?

The EU will be one of the actors playing a regional leadership role and competing for a global role on some issues, namely climate change, the redesigning of financial international architecture and trade negotiations.

Fundamentally, Europe wants to be a partner of the US. European leaders, and some American leaders, are aware that teaming up, to the extent that it is possible, to develop joint EU-US positions, increases the ability to achieve collective answers which match their common interests. Particularly in a world where the spread of democracy would be arrested for a while, and where you have authoritarian nations more able to determine their own future, it is logical to have the US and Europe on the same side.

In that scenario would NATO be a constraint for the US leadership because of diverging allied preferences and the consensus rule within the Alliance? Or would it be an asset to enhance US leadership thanks to NATO ability to rally European military support?

I think that NATO is more a vehicle for US leadership than an obstacle to it. It provides a forum where America can exert its influence within the transatlantic context, because the US is by far the most powerful member of NATO and controls the military command structure, as shown by the missions undertaken with NATO leadership in Afghanistan and elsewhere. The transatlantic alliance also remains a useful insurance policy for European countries on security matters.

America is and will remain for some time the most powerful country in the world, notwithstanding the economic crisis, and there are no countries or groups of countries which can aspire to lead globally as the US does. Some countries can resist but they

do not have an alternative to the American leadership, even if they don't like it. NATO reflects this continuing ambivalence among Europeans towards America.

The economic crisis in the US has weakened the American international leadership. Yet the crisis has also hit Russian, European and Japanese economies. In addition, China relies primarily on exports to Western markets that are now at risk. When the crisis ends, which pole of the international system is likely to find itself in a stronger position?

I think that economically the US has the potential in the middle-long term to regain much of the economic power lost in the last few years. Firstly, because of the internal, open, dynamic market which attracts and is partly driven by skilled immigrants and a low-cost labourforce. Secondly, because of the strength of the educational system at the higher levels and the American ability to both invent and employ technology. By contrast, China has huge internal problems, the EU and Japan lack the ability to attract and integrate skilled migrant workers, and Russia has several structural weaknesses. As a result, the US could emerge relatively stronger after the crisis.

Yet one of the lessons other countries have learned by this crisis is that they cannot rely as in the past on the American market. They are therefore seeking to reduce their economic dependency on the US. For example, China is trying to base its economy more on internal demand and to diversify its economic transactions; the EU-China trade relation is becoming one of the largest in the world. And many countries in the Middle East are investing more in the Far East, in North Africa or domestically, rather than in the US. (edit note: The rather works here because by "investing more in the Far East" the author is not claiming that Middle East countries are now investing a larger sum in that region than they are in the US, but just that they are now investing more money in that region than before, and that money is coming from previously US investments.)

How does the Iraq military engagement inherited by Bush constrain Obama? Do the recent successful provincial elections allow a rapid withdrawal of the US troops from a stabilized Iraq?

The US has certainly demonstrated some of the limits of its military power through the course of 2003-2007, prior to the "surge", and this has in many ways emboldened America's enemies. Even if the US withdrew troops at a fast rate over this year, at least 40-50.000 American soldiers will probably remain deployed in Iraq for some time. As a result, the US has become an internal security actor in the Middle East rather than an external arbiter. Instead of indirectly using its military power to influence countries in the region, through military assistance, bases, and threatened use of force, , the US now has many troops physically there and that makes America constrained by the environment. For example, this military presence gives another option for the Iranians, and another target for US enemies which can directly attack Americans rather than their allies. The risk, at least for the next 5-8 years, is that the US will have less room to manoeuvre than in the past, and a more complicated context for its diplomatic effort.

How will Obama handle the military engagement in Afghanistan?

In the last months a serious attempt to re-think the US strategy in Afghanistan took place in the Obama camp. During the campaign, the strategy was to define Afghanistan the "right war" and Iraq the "wrong war", and try to win the first one. Now that Obama is in power he has to face the reality that Iraq is the "right" war

because it is finished, while Afghanistan is the “wrong” war because it requires deploying more soldiers in a vast and difficult country.

More American troops will be sent there to decrease the level of Taliban activities, but there is a growing realization that trying to use the troops to militarily defeat the Taliban could be counter-productive, as the Europeans have argued. Thus, the increase of troops is aimed to achieve a transition period to change the strategy without a drop in the level of security. In this context, the demand to European countries to send more combat troops becomes less important, while increased logistic and economic support by Europe is welcomed.

To what extent and in which direction will Obama change the US policy towards Iran?

I think he will change in the near term because he will engage diplomatically Iran in a way the US did not before, in order to reach a compromise on stopping the nuclear weapons capabilities. But if after some years of soft approach Iran will continue on the nuclear track, and then the Obama administration will turn to a much more aggressive policy.

Since 2001, the EU has successfully included almost all European countries, ESDP has deployed many missions in the Balkans and elsewhere, and the Euro has become a strong currency. Will Obama take the EU into account?

Obama wants strong bilateral relationships with some European countries: the British relation will be important for intelligence cooperation and Afghanistan, the French relation to include Lebanon and Syria in the Middle East peace process, and the German one to handle relations with Russia.

At the same time, the EU will be inescapably important thanks to the united and coherent position it has demonstrated on climate change negotiations, because the dialogue within the EU on the financial regulation reforms will affect the G20, and because of the EU role in WTO talks. As a result, the EU is an important partner for some Obama administration policies.

Yet, for Obama’s top priorities the EU is “instrumental”, not the central objective. These objectives are: having a successful relation with China, a resolution to the Middle East crisis in which the US retains leadership, building more constructive relations with Russia and re-establishing relationships with Latin America. Apart from Afghanistan, on those issues the EU does not have a central role for the US.

Robert Gates, Hillary Clinton, James Jones: is there a certain degree of continuity of the Obama administration with the previous ones?

When Obama said change, he meant change from the most extreme aspects of the Bush doctrine, not change from the traditional US foreign policy. He will probably return to the old style American approach, that means negotiating and engaging with allies without an ideological stump. Obama will also change the tone of his positions, coming back to a magnanimous language and undertaking hard diplomatic work through the UN. That’s the reason he has surrounded himself with a staff of expert practitioners of traditional US foreign policy. This is a change from the very unique path undertaken by Bush during his first term, not a change from 50 years of American foreign policy.

I was at the LSE the night Obama was elected, and it was crowded by people from all over the world so excited to celebrate his victory. Is the current shift of the world public opinion in favour of the US structural or contingent?

Instinct tells me that the shift is more contingent than structural. The Europeans perceive Obama as a European running America, people elsewhere see themselves in him, thanks to his very polyglot and international background.

We can already see with the difficulties approving the economic stimulus package and dealing with the Palestinian crisis that it is hard to change some structural features of America. Americans are physically far away from the areas of greatest instability in the world. They don't fear Iran as Arab countries do. They don't fear North Africa as Europeans do. They don't fear Russia as Poland does. From this distance, America can take a more detached and strategic view of issues that for other countries represent a massive reality, even if sometimes the world comes into America as happened on September, 11. As a result, these structural features of the US limit Obama's ambitions.

**Alessandro Marrone
Chatham House, London**