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Undermining America: The Opiate of Military Dominance

By Brad Allenby

It seems self-evident to most people that national power is predominantly a matter of military capability. Certainly, military power was critical in a world characterized by colonialism, where direct control of resources was so important to national power. Today, however, advanced economies increasingly rely on global financial and information networks and highly flexible economic and political institutions. Accordingly, the key to obtaining and keeping superpower status increasingly is not just military, but balance among five core constituents: economic, science and technology capability, military, institutional, and cultural.

Until recently the United States has been the one power that has appeared to be globally competent in all five categories. It has the largest single economy, a currently unmatched science and technology capability, the most technologically advanced military, a transparent institutional structure based on the rule of law, and a cultural ascendancy that was reflected by the admiration many had for the United States and, in another way, by the success of American global brands such as Coca-cola, McDonald's, or Disney. This balanced competency made America truly formidable, and, conversely, was a difficult mix of capabilities for other nations to match. Economic power, for example, made Japan an Asian power despite relative military weakness, but institutional weaknesses in its political structure have contributed significantly to its recent drift. The European Union retains its international position despite a relatively unimpressive economy, in part because its institutions reflect a resilient and open social-democratic political framework.

But the core to America as superpower was not military. Rather it was its remarkable cultural supremacy. The United States attracted brains, capital, and admiration from around the world because of its uniquely open, optimistic, entrepreneurial and mobile society. This was reflected in the numbers of students attracted to American universities, the number of non-native born entrepreneurs who created Silicon Valley and its Texas, Massachusetts and Oregon mimics, the success of American consumer goods and cultural exports, and the continued attraction of the American experience for those prosecuted or discriminated against in other cultures. The real key to long-term U. S. dominance was America as myth: not myth as imaginary, but as a larger than life projection of American values and culture across the world.

Unfortunately, post 9/11 American policy with its emphasis on militarism seriously distorted its unique balance of competences, especially by undermining American cultural authority. To begin with, the Administration chose a domestic response that focused on threat and the cultivation of fear rather than defiant openness,

thus striking at the heart of the openness and optimism which have been among the most admired characteristics of American culture. This destructive defensiveness was augmented by the Administration's unilateralism and ill-disguised contempt for those who disagree with it. True cultural power is attractive, rather than imposed. America gained its cultural power not by militarily imposing its values; rather, it simply displayed them and their attractiveness drew admiration, and immigration, from around the world. Now, however, America is widely perceived as arrogant, biased, and hypocritical, rather than powerful and appealing.

The war in Iraq also illustrates the Administration's mistaken belief that military action is the only meaningful component of American power ("Mission Accomplished"). The Iraq quagmire is a direct consequence of the failure of the political operatives who started the conflict to understand that the sorts of wars America fights these days are cultural, not military. Victory under such circumstances requires sophistication in cultural matters.

For the time being, the United States is still the world's only superpower. But America's leaders have failed to realize that the wellspring of its strength is cultural. The U.S. was attacked on 9/11 precisely because it was culturally dominant, not because of its military prowess. Iraq is a failure because the Administration sought a military solution to complex Islamic cultural dysfunctions. This serious miscalculation, and the larger context of 9/11 responses that surround it, have become defining contributions to the decline of America. For, ironically, the initial illusory "successes" have proven catastrophic for the American mythos, the real American boots on the ground. In choosing to militarize American society, the Administration in actuality fatally undermines America's penultimate and most potent claim: that it remains the best hope of humanity. America, the optimistic City on the Hill, is being turned into just another gated community.

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