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American Leadership

The twentieth century saw the steady emergence of the United States as the most powerful country in the world. Only beginning to extend its influence globally in the aftermath of the Spanish-American war, by the 1990s it had become unchallenged in its economic and military superiority.

The twenty-first century has been a different story, however. The United States has found itself struggling in two wars, which have proved far more difficult than expected. In addition, it has been gripped by the most severe economic crisis in decades.

The economic pressures mean fundamental questions have to be asked about the American role in the world. Can the United States continue to assume the commitments it has undertaken? If not, what is the alternative?

Will American leadership decline, or is there another way to maintain influence?

So far the debate has been dominated by those who favor continuing our prior guarantor role and foreign entanglements, and even expanding them. Perhaps the best evidence of this are the U.S. naval exercises conducted near China, which were designed in part to send a message to Beijing. Speaking in Hanoi, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton assured the Association of Southeast Asian Nations that the United States has a "national interest" in preserving the freedom of the seas.

That may be the case, but the implication that the United States might now feel obliged to defend Vietnam from China raises questions about how the United States can fulfill its commitments.

Secretary Clinton, and others in the Obama Administration, seem to be assuming that a demonstration of American power and commitment will have a deterrent effect. That, after all, was the logic that seemingly prevailed in the Cold War. "For 50 years, NATO contained communism and kept America and Europe secure," President Bill Clinton claimed in his 1998 State of the Union Address, asking for Senate approval to approve an expanded membership for the alliance.

But can the American security umbrella still provide the protection it offered during the Cold War? Even in those days, NATO's Asian counterpart, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, failed miserably. The North Vietnamese were not deterred by the American commitment to South Vietnam, we lost the war, and SEATO dissolved.

Have we misunderstood the role of military power? The Soviet Union had plenty of missiles and tanks, but it disintegrated. China is much more powerful than it used to be, but North Korea defies it (as well as us) with apparent impunity.

What does being a superpower mean, then?

At the founding of the United States, President George Washington offered another approach to these questions. Despite having led the United States to victory in its war for independence, Washington warned Americans about foreign commitments and big military establishments, which he regarded as "inauspicious to liberty." In a sharp departure from the European practice of power politics and shifting alliances, Washington thought the greatness of a country -- the fulfillment of its role as a leader -- lay in the example it set to the rest of the world.

"It will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and at no distant period, a great nation, to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence," he advised in his Farewell Address. "Who can doubt that, in the course of time and things, the fruits of such a plan would richly repay any temporary advantages which might be lost by a steady adherence to it?"

Changing policy to focus on the power of example would require a shift in our political structure. Washington, DC, is filled with ambitious people who want to do things; that's why they're here. A policy of example means they would have less to do, and there probably would be fewer jobs available for them, which helps explain why this policy has not been favored.

Given our financial constraints, we must now make a choice. Do we equate leadership with global hegemony, or do we concentrate on rebuilding our society and setting a good example?

It is a debate that is long overdue.