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Op-ed

RETHINKING LEADERSHIP: A DIPLOMATIC REFLECTION ON US GLOBAL PRIMACY IN A CHANGING WORLD

By Daryl Swanepoel

In recent months, I have found myself increasingly reflecting on the shifting nature of global politics, specifically the intensifying polarisation between the United States and its perceived rivals. The increasingly assertive tone from Washington, the vilification of competing powers and the strategic hardening of positions have given rise to a growing sense of unease. What is driving this renewed emphasis on confrontation and to what end?

As someone who believes deeply in the value of cooperation, mutual respect and inclusive progress, I worry that we are witnessing the re-emergence of a Cold War mindset. One that risks undermining the hard-won gains of multilateralism, development cooperation and global solidarity forged in the post-World War II and post-Cold War eras.

This article is not written to cast blame or take sides. Not at all. Rather, it is a diplomatic reflection, offered in the spirit of constructive questioning. It is an invitation to consider whether the United States, in its response to rising global competitors, particularly China, might find greater strength not in reasserting dominance, but in reimagining leadership for a multipolar world.

The question of economic supremacy: Zero-sum or shared growth?

At the heart of US strategic thinking lies a long-standing belief that being the world's number one economy is essential, not just for domestic prosperity, but for global leadership. This belief is understandable, especially given the remarkable contributions the United States has made to global development, innovation and stability over the past century.

However, in today's deeply interconnected world, the notion of absolute economic dominance may no longer be the most rational or productive aspiration. Global prosperity increasingly depends on collaboration, mutual resilience and inclusive growth. Nations benefit when others succeed. A more prosperous China, India, Brazil or South Africa, for instance, can become valuable partners in trade, climate action and technological progress.

If the primary concern is the well-being of ordinary Americans, it may be worth asking whether the US economy truly requires global supremacy or whether a competitive, but cooperative international environment would better serve national interests. After all, many high-income, high-wellbeing nations have flourished without being number one.

Military strength and strategic intentions: Security or supremacy?

The United States maintains by far the world's most powerful military. Officially, this is framed as a commitment to protecting global peace and defending democratic allies. Yet, as with any great power, questions inevitably arise around intent. Are all military deployments and alliances purely defensive in nature or are they at times a means to maintain strategic dominance?

This is not to cast doubt on America's intentions. Rather it is to raise a broader philosophical question: Can lasting peace be achieved through perpetual pre-eminence or does real security come from shared norms and mutual respect among sovereign states?

Indeed, the human cost of military overreach is significant, not just for those abroad, but also for American taxpayers and veterans. Might some of these resources be more effectively channelled into serving domestic priorities, such as education, health, infrastructure and innovation, as well as multilateral diplomacy?

The Rare Earths race: A case study in strategic anxiety

Rare earth elements, crucial for green energy, high-tech manufacturing, and defence, have become a flashpoint in US - China competition. Understandably, the US seeks to secure its supply chains and reduce dependence. But here, too, a distinction should be made: Is the primary goal strategic autonomy or the preservation of industrial dominance?

The answer matters, especially when we consider how resource competition can shape global policy. If the priority is sustainability and global equity, international cooperation, including with China, on responsible mining, environmental safeguards and technology sharing may be more ethical and effective than a scramble for control.

Self-interest and the ethics of leadership

It is fair and expected that nations act in their own interests. But the United States has long aspired to more than that. It has projected itself as a moral leader, a defender of freedom and a steward of international norms.

From a global humanistic perspective, this moral leadership is best upheld not through dominance, but through example. That means:

- Applying human rights principles consistently, regardless of a country's strategic value.
- Supporting democratic institutions globally without coercion.
- Championing fair trade, climate finance and technology access for developing nations.

The concern, increasingly voiced in academic and diplomatic circles, is that the moral clarity of US leadership may be muddled when values appear to be applied selectively. When the US critiques China's governance, but at the same time maintains close ties with other autocratic states for strategic reasons, the message becomes blurred. Again, this is not a criticism, but a concern that selective advocacy may inadvertently diminish the US's soft power and global legitimacy.

China's rise: A threat or a test of adaptability?

It is true that China operates under a vastly different political model and is increasingly assertive in its foreign policy. Differences as to the Chinese interpretation of human rights, assertiveness in the South China Sea and digital surveillance are valid and deserve attention.

However, China's economic rise is not, in itself, an aggressive act. It reflects long-term planning, population scale and integration into global markets. In many ways, China's development mirrors that of other industrialised nations, only faster. Its growing influence, particularly in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia, presents a real challenge to US influence. But is the best response to contain China or to renew US engagement with these regions on more equal, less conditional terms?

The Global South increasingly sees China as a viable partner, not necessarily because of ideology, but because of perceived respect and responsiveness. The question I am pondering is whether the United States can respond to this shift not by resisting change, but by reimagining its own global engagement.

Toward a shared future

At this pivotal moment, the United States has a choice. It can double down on hegemony, viewing China's rise as a zero-sum threat to be countered at all cost. Or it can step into a more mature form of leadership; one that recognises the inevitability of a multipolar world and embraces cooperative stewardship over combative supremacy.

This path does not demand retreat. Rather, it calls for confidence. Confidence in America's enduring strengths: its open society, its innovation culture, its civil society and its democratic ideals.

Being "number one" may no longer be the most important metric. Perhaps being first among equals, in ethics, generosity, and global cooperation, will define the most respected and resilient leaders of tomorrow.

Conclusion

The United States has long stood at the crossroads of power and principle. As global dynamics shift, its greatest strength may lie not in resisting change, but in embracing it with humility, adaptability and renewed moral clarity.

The world does not need a guardian, it needs a partner. And there is perhaps no nation better positioned than the United States to lead in that spirit, if it so chooses.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute