

Global Anxiety Over the U.S. Leadership Gap

By [Andrew Hammond](#)

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Ten years on, it is clear that the Iraq war fueled a remarkable change in international opinion toward the U.S. These movements in foreign sentiment are the most significant since at least the Vietnam War and hold key present day implications for U.S. policymakers.

Over the course of the past decade, two cross-cutting meta-narratives have been at work in international public opinion. The first is the global growth of anti-Americanism, driven by Iraq and wider perceptions of excessive U.S. power, unilateralism and over reliance on military might. This was an especially strong impulse from 2003 to 2008 during the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush.

In the aftermath of the Iraq war, favorability toward the U.S. went into free-fall in many countries. This and the accompanying rise of anti-Americanism is important because it has undercut U.S. soft power and thereby reduced Washington's ability to promote its interests overseas and indeed those of its allies.

History has shown the strong role that soft power has played in obtaining favorable outcomes for Washington. For example, successive U.S. administrations used soft resources skillfully after World War II to encourage other countries into a system of alliances and institutions, such as NATO, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the United Nations. The Cold War was subsequently won by a strategy that combined soft and hard power.

The falloff in international favorability toward the U.S. since Iraq has, in most cases, been partially reversed. At the same time, however, significant issues persist.

For instance, in Britain, the Czech Republic, Germany, Jordan, Mexico, Poland, Russia and Turkey, were among the 13 key states that were surveyed in both 2002 and 2012 by the annual Pew Global Attitudes Project, significantly fewer people now think favorably of the U.S. than they did a decade earlier. This is most clear in the two Muslim-majority countries: Since 2002, U.S. favorability ratings have halved in Turkey, a NATO ally, from 30 percent to 15 percent, and the drop in Jordan, another pro-Western state, has been from 25 percent to 12 percent.

The election in 2008 of President Barack Obama, who is more personally popular with foreign audiences than Bush, produced an immediate increase in favorability toward the U.S. But since Obama took office, there has been a significant decrease in international approval of U.S. policies, with particular concerns including reliance on drone strikes in the campaign against terrorism.

To be sure, significant ups and downs in international favorability toward the United States are not unprecedented. During the Vietnam War, anti-Americanism increased markedly. There was also significant overseas concern about U.S. policy during the early presidency of Ronald Reagan following increased tensions with the Soviet Union.

While the U.S. fully recovered from these previous episodes, it remains unclear whether this will happen again. In part, this is because those former rises in anti-Americanism occurred during an era of rigid bipolarity in which U.S. allies regarded the Soviet Union as the greater danger by far and tended to give Washington the benefit of any doubt.

The post-Cold War world is more fluid and uncertain. This is where the second cross-cutting meta-narrative, which has assumed special prominence since 2008, is key. Relating to the perceived recent decline of the United States, it reflects widespread international assessments of the country's poor human rights record in Iraq and Afghanistan and the global financial crisis, which is commonly perceived to have accelerated the rise of China and the wider East.

Specifically, there has been sizable growth in international opinion that China will or already has surpassed the U.S. as the world's most powerful state. For instance, between 2009 and 2011 alone, there was an at least 10 or more percentage point increase in public support for this proposition in Spain, France, Pakistan, Jordan, Israel, Poland and Germany, according to Pew.

China's growing prominence has aroused mixed international reactions. In some cases, there is considerable anxiety, but elsewhere the perceived shift in the global balance of power is welcomed. Interestingly, numerous Muslim-majority states, where favorability towards the United States is generally low, are among those who tend to regard China's rise most

positively.

In coming years, the interplay between these meta-narratives will be shaped by global events. Even though some international opinion perceives the United States to be in decline, there are continuing concerns about how Washington uses its power, a factor that could become especially salient again in the event of U.S. military action against Iran.

Conversely, if the United States does not show strong economic recovery in the near future, as it did following recessions in the early 1980s and early 1990s when widespread concerns about U.S. decline were last voiced, this would fuel international anxiety about a global leadership vacuum, especially if China's rise is perceived to continue unabated.

Whichever way momentum flows, the post-9/11 decade, which dates from the 2003 Iraq invasion up to the global financial crisis of 2007-08, will be remembered as an extraordinary period in terms of international opinion volatility toward the U.S. It will take another remarkable event or combination of developments to witness comparable movements of global sentiment in coming years.

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