

Home > Policies > Foreign affairs > Americas

The American leader we need

By Chris Patten

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What Europeans need is a president who requires them to put their efforts where their mouths have been.

Around the world, America's presidential election campaign has attracted as much attention as domestic political controversies in each of our own countries. The interest the world has taken in America's vote is the best example of America's soft power, and a lesson in democracy from the world's only superpower. If only we could all vote as well as watch and listen, because the outcome is vital for everyone around the world.

What does the world want – and, perhaps more importantly, what does it need – from a new American president?

Much as some may hate to admit it, anti-Americanism is a sentiment that has been fed and nurtured during the Bush years. Yet the world still needs American leadership.

Yes, we are witnessing the emergence of China, Brazil, and India as important global economic players. Yes, we have watched the humiliating fall of Wall Street's masters of the universe. Yes, American military prowess has drained away into what Winston Churchill called "the thoughtless deserts of Mesopotamia," and its moral authority has been weakened by events in places from Guantánamo Bay to Abu Ghraib.

All that is true. Yet the United States remains the world's only superpower, the only nation that matters in every part of the globe, the only country capable of mobilizing international action to tackle global problems.

A new president's first task will be to return America's economic competitiveness and self-confidence. It will not be easy to rein in over-spending and over-borrowing, to restore the real family values of saving, thrift, responsibility, and fair reward. Achieving these goals is bound to involve a greater regard for social equality, after a period in which the very rich have been able to protect a "Roaring Twenties" lifestyle through cleverly exploiting the "culture wars" – i.e., the populist prejudices of their much poorer fellow citizens.

With America turning away from its global role of borrower of last resort, the rest of us will need to sharpen our competitive edge to sell in other markets. What is imperative is that this should not be impeded by a return to protectionism. A new American president would do well to remember the disastrous consequences of protectionism in the 1920s and 1930s. President Herbert Hoover's failures should be a sanguinary lesson.

We all look to the next US president to re-engage with the world community and international organisations, accepting that even a superpower should accept the rules that apply to others. The United Nations is far from perfect. It needs reform – as do the bodies that provide global economic governance. That will take time. But a necessary if not sufficient condition for change is America's commitment to and leadership of the process. Forget the distraction of trying to create an alternative to the UN – the so-called 'League of Democracies'. It won't work.

We want a new president who will aim to make a success of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Renewal Conference in 2010 by scrapping more weapons, abandoning research into them, and challenging others to do the same. That would be the best backdrop to establishing tougher surveillance and monitoring, beginning to engage with Iran, and searching for a way to involve India and Pakistan in a global nuclear agreement.

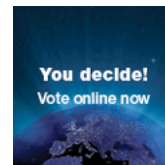
Ahead of that, a new president should unleash America's creative potential in boosting energy efficiency and developing clean technologies. It would be a welcome surprise if a comprehensive follow-up to the Kyoto Treaty could be agreed next year. But at least we should aim to agree on the process that will move world-wide discussions in the right direction and, as part of that, America should aim to engage Europe, China, and India, in particular, on technological developments like clean coal.

America's relationship with China will be a key to

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prosperity and security in this new century. I do not think that a struggle for hegemony is inevitable, or that it would be desirable. The US should focus more attention on China, without ever pretending that China's record on human rights can be swept under the carpet. China cannot sustain its economic development without political changes and environmental improvements.

In the Middle East, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert offered wise advice to the next US president upon his retirement. Israel and Palestine have become, he said, the hopeless and bloody prism through which American diplomacy often seems to see the world. It has long since been time to move on, making a sustained drive for the sort of settlement that was almost achieved in the Clinton years.

There is a paradox in all this. The world has for years called for a multilateral approach from Washington. When we get one, will the rest of us – Europe, for example – actually respond with sufficient commitment and drive? It would at least be a welcome challenge to be required to put our efforts where our mouths have been.


Chris Patten is a former European commissioner for external relations, chairman of the UK Conservative Party, and was the last British governor of Hong Kong. He is currently chancellor of Oxford University and a member of the House of Lords, the upper house of the UK parliament. © Project Syndicate, 2008.

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