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Are We Still Winning The Values Argument?



Jonathan Clarke read Classics and Chinese at Oxford, but the eccentricities of the Diplomatic Service took him to postings in Germany, Zimbabwe and Washington. After taking early retirement in 1992, he settled in Washington where he has written three books about US foreign policy. He is active as a commentator and consultant on US affairs.

The familiar phrases that surround the UK-US relationship never fail to uplift. As an official at the British Embassy in Washington in 1991, I can remember President Bush toasting the Queen with the words, *'We are joined by a common heritage and culture, civilization and soul,'* and the Queen replying, *'The British have never felt America to be a foreign land.'* No matter that other countries, notably Japan and Israel, enjoy relationships of similar intimacy, these Anglo-American exchanges never fall short of elevated, emotion-laden rhetoric. This intimacy transferred directly into operational matters. When confronted with global or regional crises, the first instinct of generations of British official was to check *'What does Washington think?'*

This did not arise only because of the size of the US market, the strength of its military or the dominance of the dollar. In the area of what is now called 'soft power', the US enjoyed inestimable prestige. The perceived openness of its society, the innovative dynamism of its economy, the reputation of its great universities, the vibrancy of the melting pot, the allure of Hollywood and the grandeur of its national parks: these are just some of the assets that underpinned the global attractiveness of 'Brand America' and allowed people to look beyond things like the Vietnam war, the obsession with guns and the treatment of minorities.

Many observers would agree that these advantages have been eroding for some years, perhaps starting when the deployment of US might post 9/11 failed to deliver anything that resembled victory in either Iraq or Afghanistan and were accompanied by some grisly visuals of US detention centres.

However, as the US and China lock themselves into a global popularity contest - perhaps a 'which is the uglier sister contest' would accord better with the perceptions of many - it seems worth asking whether we have reached a decisive turning point. After all, with an influential American journalist asking whether 2020 is the *'worst year in modern American history'* and the COVID-19 crisis showcasing so many shortcomings in basic American governance, to say nothing of the healthcare system, there is little doubt that America's image and,

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consequently, its soft power is exposed to an examination which is as harsh and unsympathetic as anyone can remember.

To start by talking one thing off the table: if asked whether they would prefer to live in the America of Donald Trump or the China of Xi Jinping, few people outside China would say the latter. But that is unlikely to be the real question facing most people. In fact, most countries, particularly those in the Chinese gravitational force field like Japan, South Korea and Indonesia are working furiously to void exactly that choice.

The real question arises when the issue of values comes into play. This is the Ur-soft power component. If people identify with your values, they will cut you a lot of slack. Thus, the first paragraph of the London Declaration issued at the NATO 2019 Summit speaks about the *'values we share, including democracy, individual liberty, human rights, and the rule of law.'*

Twenty years ago it might have been easy to define and defend what those values were. But these twenty years have not been kind. Leaving aside the horror of the immediate headlines, two American presidents have been elected on a minority of the popular vote - albeit in accordance with the unique US system. The US has launched military invasions of questionable legality. Individual liberty and human rights in America have been shown to be crucially dependent on the colour of one's skin. Income inequality is now the highest in the G7. Women's reproductive rights have never been under greater threat. Soldiers convicted of war crimes have received presidential pardons.

In the past three years the US has turned its back on many international entities or agreements of core importance to its allies: the Paris Climate Change Accord, TPP, the JCPOA, the INF Treaty, the Open Skies Treaty, UNESCO (again), the WHO. It has hamstrung the judicial processes of the WTO. At a time when NATO is cajoling its members to raise their defence spending against the Russian threat, the White House has suggested readmitting Russia to the G7.

To the hard-bitten diplomat among US allies, none of this may count for much and they may be more inclined to see these differences as policy rather than values based. But they may face more resistance from their own publics over aligning with the US and among the non-committed they may encounter questions about why the White House describes events in Hong Kong as 'protests' while calling similar events at home 'riots.' In other words, the values argument will enjoy much less clinching persuasiveness. On this front, as on so many others, the world has become a more complex place.

As the UK prepares its decisive break from the EU at the end of the year, the dilemma may become even more acute. Following the British withdrawal from the EU foreign policy mechanisms, the UK will have urgent need of new partners. The first instinct will be to deepen the relationship with the US. China, where recent bad Chinese behaviour on COVID-19 and Hong Kong have strengthened the arguments in favour of tougher approach in close alignment with Washington, is an obvious example as shown by the deference on Huawei. On certain other fronts - climate change, Iran and women's reproductive rights - British values

will be more aligned with allies other than Washington. The choices for the UK are not getting any easier.

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