

BESA STUDIES IN INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

# US Foreign Policy and Global Standing in the 21st Century

Realities and perceptions

Edited by  
Efraim Inbar and Jonathan Rynhold



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Jonathan Rynhold**

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# US Foreign Policy and Global Standing in the 21st Century

This book examines US foreign policy and global standing in the twenty-first century.

The United States is the most powerful actor in world politics today. Against this backdrop, the present volume examines how the foreign policies pursued by Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama have affected elite and public perceptions of the United States. By examining the United States' standing from the perspective of different actors from across various regions, including China, Russia, Latin America, and the Middle East, while also assessing how these perceptions interact with the United States' own policies, this book presents a fresh interpretation of the United States' global standing. In doing so, the volume evaluates how these perceptions affect the realities of US power, and what impact this has on molding US foreign policy and the policies of other global powers. A number of books address the question of which grand strategy the United States should adopt and the issue of whether or not the United States is in relative decline as a world power. However, the debate on these issues has largely been set against the policies of the Bush administration. By contrast, this volume argues that while Obama has raised the popularity of the United States since the low reached by Bush, the United States' credibility and overall standing have actually been damaged further under President Obama.

This book will be of much interest to students of US foreign policy, US national security, strategic studies, Middle Eastern politics, international relations, and security studies generally.

**Efraim Inbar** is Professor in Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University and the Director of the Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies, Israel. He is author/editor of numerous titles, including most recently *The Arab Spring, Democracy and Security: Domestic and Regional Ramifications* (Routledge, 2013).

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# Introduction

*Efraim Inbar and Jonathan Rynhold*

This book is about the United States' standing in the world. That is, it is about how other states and their citizens, as well US citizens themselves, perceive the United States in the international arena. Is it perceived as strong or weak, resolute or vacillating, reliable or perfidious, revolutionary or conservative, moral or immoral? The answers to these questions will greatly affect the United States' ability to conduct its foreign policy successfully. The higher a state's standing – its reputation, prestige and credibility – the easier it will be for it to pursue its objectives at a lower cost in terms of blood and treasure. For as Morgenthau (1954, 27) recognized, while military and economic power is grounded on certain objective material factors, "political power is a psychological relationship between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised."

That much is relatively uncontroversial. However, there is a big debate about what constitutes the most important basis for a state's standing. Is it more important for a state to be liked or feared? On the one hand, it can be argued that it is more important to be feared. For if enemies do not fear you, this will encourage adventurism on their part. Equally, if allies do not trust your resolution and reliability they will defect to the other side (Kagan 1995). On the other hand, it can be argued that being liked reduces the possible reasons for conflict in the first place, and that generating a very fearful reputation may drive otherwise disparate states to unite in a counterbalancing formation (Pape 2005; Walt 2006).

A second issue concerns the relative importance of a state's standing vis-à-vis political elites and public opinion. Of course it is desirable to be both feared and liked by both elites and publics. But it is often impossible to pursue one objective without cost to the other. Thus, the assertive grand strategy pursued by George W. Bush during his first administration enhanced fear of the United States among Middle Eastern leaders such that Colonel Qaddafi surrendered Libya's nuclear program, while at the same time drastically reducing the United States' popularity with public opinion throughout most of the world. In contrast, Obama's restrained grand strategy increased the United States' popularity with public opinion abroad (Pew 2006, 2012, 2013a, 2013b), while, as argued in this volume by

several authors, simultaneously reducing the fear of the United States among political elites in states hostile to it, such as Iran and North Korea.

### **The United States' standing and grand strategy**

The United States remains extremely powerful militarily, far more powerful than any other state. Even after major cuts in the defense budget under Obama, US military spending constitutes about 40 percent of global military expenditure, more than four times as much spending as the next state, China. Moreover, the United States has a huge lead in power projection capabilities, with ten aircraft carriers; China and Russia have only one aircraft carrier each. Aside from this, US technology means that it also retains a significant qualitative edge (Macias *et al.* 2014; SIPRI 2015).

In economic terms, the United States remains the state with the largest economy, but the world economy is essentially multilateral, with the European Union's combined economy exceeding that of the United States, while China is catching up with it fast (World Bank 2013; Knoema 2015). Indeed, despite the United States' continued dominance, it is clear that US material power is in relative decline, though there is a major debate about the extent of that decline, its speed, and its strategic significance. Some have argued that the US can retain its dominant position for the foreseeable future if it demonstrates the will and skill to do so (Lieber 2012; Beckley 2011; Kagan 2012; Joffe 2009; Drezner 2011a; Nye 2011); while others argue that the process of decline is upon it and that this is best managed by a cautious strategy of retrenchment (Kupchan 2002, 2012; Zakaria 2009; Layne 2009; Pape 2009; Posen 2014; Rachman 2011). In any case, much of public opinion across the world (with the notable exception of opinion among the United States' East Asian allies) believes that Chinese power will eventually eclipse that of the United States (Pew 2013b).

In terms of soft power appeal, US culture and values remain far more popular than China's, though in the wake of 9/11 there has been much debate about the growth of anti-Americanism (Katzenstein and Keohane 2007; Rubin and Rubin 2005; O'Connor and Griffiths 2006). Some have argued that anti-Americanism is essentially a prejudice grounded on a hatred of the United States' liberal democratic values (Ajami 2003; Berman, 2004; Hollander 1995; Markovits 2007; Revel 2003), and/or the political interests of dictatorial regimes (Rubin 2002). These authors focus on the ideological foundations – radical Islamist or leftist – of the most vehement forms of anti-Americanism. Others argue that anti-Americanism is primarily a result of an assertive, interventionist US foreign policy, especially that of George W. Bush (Telhami 2002; Pape 2005; Chiozza 2009), and they point to the decline in positive attitudes toward the United States under Bush and their partial recovery under Obama (Datta 2012). Some consider these trends in public opinion to be strategically significant (Datta 2012), others are not convinced (Katzenstein and Keohane 2007).



Indeed, George W. Bush and Barack Obama pursued very different grand strategies, which were informed by very different answers to the issues discussed above. Following the end of the Cold War, a unipolar world emerged, with the United States as the dominant power (Huntington 1999; Mastanduno 1997). Against this background, from 9/11 until midway through his second administration, Bush pursued an interventionist grand strategy of “primacy,” which rested on the assumption that the United States could maintain its dominance, and that the best way to preserve its standing was through an assertive, and relatively unilateral, approach (Halper and Clarke 2004; Daalder and Lindsay 2003). On the one hand, such an approach was designed to induce in the United States’ enemies and competitors a healthy fear and respect. In the wake of 9/11, the United States would demonstrate that it was neither weak nor decadent. On the other hand, the Bush administration tended to the view that the core of anti-Americanism was ideological. On this basis, its democratization agenda was supposed to increase the popularity of the United States in the long run, the model being the transformation of German and Japanese attitudes toward the United States after 1945.

Meanwhile, the first Obama administration emerged at the time of a renewed wave of international relations literature, once more heralding the US decline in world affairs (Posen 2007; Zakaria 2009; Layne 2009; Rachman 2011; Kupchan 2012). In contrast to Bush, Obama pursued a cautious grand strategy of retrenchment, underwritten by the belief that this is the best way to manage the decline of US power (Drezner 2011b; Dueck 2015). The administration, whose rhetoric was marked both by cautious realism and idealistic dovish liberalism, operated on the assumption that the Bush strategy had severely damaged US standing, and that the way to restore that standing was to adopt the opposite strategy, namely a cautious, multilateral, and non-interventionist approach. In this vein, Obama sought to improve the United States’ standing by reaching out to the Arab public and to the regime in Iran, in an effort to make the United States appear less threatening and more likable.

## Outline of the book

This book originated in the many discussions about the standing of the United States in world affairs that were held at the Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University. We were concerned about the contours of US foreign policy in the new millennium, particularly in our region, the Middle East. We were not surprised by the unsuccessful attempts to create an Iraq or an Afghanistan in a US image. We were not convinced that the noble US goal of turning such countries into democracies, in order to prevent them from becoming incubators for terrorist organizations, was realistic. Therefore, gradually terminating overseas commitments to attain impossible political objectives made sense.