



## American Leadership and Grand Strategy in an Age of Complexity

*Tanguy Struye de Swielande*

**Many voices challenge the values and norms of the international order. If the United States seeks to maintain a relative advantage over its rivals, the rules have to be rewritten and the global system reshaped. In this sense the diagnosis of the Trump administration is partially correct – but the instruments that President Trump uses are faulty.**

In managerial terms, President Trump focuses exclusively on transactional leadership, which relies on rewards and punishments and is therefore closely linked with the coercive dimension of power. Such leadership often means that goals are set by the leader without necessarily including his followers and allies. It implies effective control over the means of threat and reward by the dominant power. One should not overlook the necessity of transactional leadership, but it is not sufficient – certainly not today, when the US is in relative decline. The concept of “power distance”, developed by Hofstede (2011), illustrates this phenomenon. The greater the asymmetry of power between leader and followers, the more the leader will simply be able to impose himself, thanks to his capabilities, hence the more transactional his leadership. On the contrary, if

the gap keeps shrinking – and provided that the leader wishes to stay at the top of the pyramid – the dominant power must increasingly consider its followers’ needs and interests and ought to share parts of the leadership’s responsibilities with them.

Leadership is about adapting to the context of a given situation, therefore – there is no “one size fits all”. The US needs to avoid becoming what John Gaddis labelled a “system destroyer” instead of a “system builder”. The setup of the international order requires the legitimation of American power by other states. More specifically, the latter should recognize the authority of the former.

As it possesses the most material and immaterial capabilities (“power to”), the US remains the great power with the most means to dominate coercively (“power over”). Yet I contend that this approach is too limited to understand the complexity of power and to guarantee the US primacy in world affairs. Indeed when “power distance” diminishes, resorting only to “power over” is very short-sighted. The more Washington sticks to a position of going it alone, the more the resistance from allies and foes will increase, and create a spill-over effect of allies and partners abandoning the US. As Foucault detailed in his work: where there is

power, there is resistance. If the US does not adjust its policy to this reality, resistance will become sharper and transform into rebellion because of the shift of power relations: the more the powerless become empowered, the more the powerful weakens (Sadan 2004: 44-45).

Consequently, if the US wants to stay on top, it will need support and cooperation, not only from its allies and partners but also from rising status quo powers such as Brazil, Indonesia and India, and from deviant great powers such as China and Russia. As President Theodore Roosevelt remarked, "Nine-tenths of wisdom is being wise in time". Accordingly, although "power to" and "power over" are indispensable characteristics of power, they are not sufficient. An additional and necessary characteristic is "power with".

This concept has been developed by Follett<sup>1</sup>: "a jointly developed power, a co-active, not a coercive power" (Thompson 2003: 79). Follett was not naive; on the contrary, she was very pragmatic and knew that "power with" would never replace "power over", only reduce it. But for Follett, to lessen "power over" was about:

- 1) Integration: finding a "solution by which the desires of both sides were satisfied, by integrating the desires of the two sides". She was defending the idea of circular behaviour as a basis for integration characterized by "interactive influence" – A influencing B and B influencing A (ibidem: 82 and 83);
- 2) Submission to the law of the situation;
- 3) Function: "each has his function, corresponding to his capabilities, and has the authority and the responsibility which go with that function" (ibidem: 85).

Let us analyse in more detail these three central ideas of the concept of "power with".

## 1. INTEGRATION

The starting point of Follett's approach is diversity, and with it the acceptance of conflict: every state has its own perceptions, ideology, history, identity... "War can never cease until we see the value of differences, that they are to be maintained not blotted out" (Follett in Whipps 2014: 412). Instead of seeing diversity as a burden, Follett sees opportunities, and possible contributions to change.

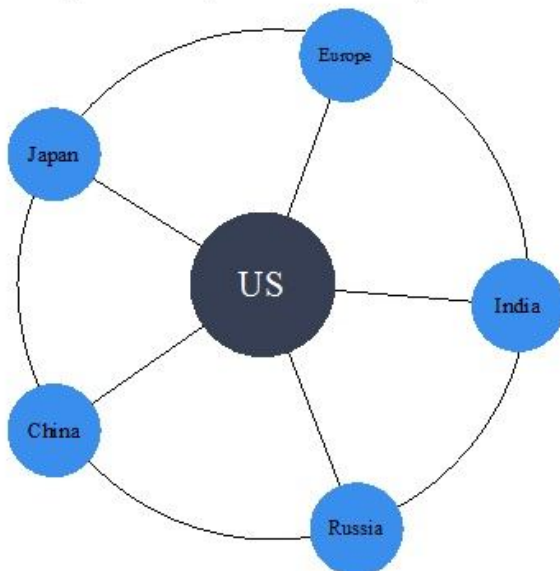
Consequently, Follett sees three ways of dealing with conflict: domination, compromise, and integration (Thompson 2003: 2-3). The first two are characterized by a "win-lose" situation, while integration is considered as a "win-win" situation. Domination is characterized by coercion, short termism, often humiliation, winner(s) and loser(s), the disappearance of diversity, animosity and a desire for revenge from the loser(s). As already explained, President Trump prefers defeat and conquest: "That is, the person with decided fight habits feels more at home, happier, in the fight movement. Moreover, it leaves the door open for further fighting, with the possibility of conquest the next time" (ibidem: 18). Compromise is characterized by each party yielding something. No winners, no losers, but frustration and dissatisfaction on both sides: "If we get only compromise, the conflict will come up again and again in some other form, for in compromise we give up part of our desire, and because we shall not be content to rest there, sometime we shall try to get the whole of our desire" (ibidem: 7).

Finally integration is about integrating the differences in a new framework that benefits all. Integration is the most viable approach in the long run. The objective is to avoid "linear

behaviour” (passively accepting the order) and to promote “circular behaviour” (ibidem: 27). Circular behaviour in international relations translates into mutual accommodation. Great powers need to be pragmatic and patient, and focus on what is doable or achievable in the current circumstances, and the US should avoid labelling other states as deviant, because the final objective is to make this “a functional whole or integrative unity” (ibidem: 27). Contrary to what one might think, this approach is very pragmatic, because goal-oriented. To achieve integration means emphasizing respect, constructive dialogue and thinking out of the box. It’s about the “art of co-operative thinking” (ibidem: 21).

In practice this could be translated into the logic of the Bismarck system (“hub and spoke”), characterized by co-leadership but with the US as systemic leader. Indeed, the Bismarck system requires a unique type of leader – the system leader, a state which catalyses co-leadership. A system leader is a state that acts across boundaries and “recognizes that there are actors at multiple levels that need to lead change in their respective contexts” (Edmunds 2017).

Figure 1: Example of the Bismarck system



Instead of seeing the system from its own vantage point and thus have a partial view of the system, the system leader is supposed to see the larger picture. System thinking is therefore taken into consideration; “ the whole picture as a living system of inter-woven causality” (ibidem). System leadership is only possible if it is based on trust, patience, empathy, the other’s perspective, communication, and by emphasizing common interests (ibidem). It should also favour co-creating the future (Sence 2015). This system would present an opportunity to adopt a profile of “initiator”, “role model” or “mentor” in a peer-to-peer network with equal authority and responsibility (Baker 2015), with the objective of guiding and facilitating a rapprochement among equals within a diverse group, without behaving explicitly as a traditional transactional leader – a status that would not be granted by the others in any case. The art of leadership is about how to keep control and while giving control and responsibility to others at the same time.

## 2. LAW OF THE SITUATION

This second dimension of the “power with” approach can only succeed by differentiating dispositional attributions from situational attributions. Many leaders make a “fundamental attribution error”, i.e. a “tendency to insufficiently take into account situational forces when interpreting the behaviours of others” (Brauer & Bourhis 2006: 610). Follett insisted already in the 1920s on the law of the situation (Feldheim 2006: 421). Each situation differs from the other; flexibility and adaptation is a requirements of a leader. No one-size-fits-all strategy should be adopted (Foley 2013: 48-49): “We cannot study the ‘psychology’ of (States), and then the ‘facts’ of the situation, as so often seems to be the process of the investigation. We must study the (States) in their relation to the facts – and then the facts themselves become as active as any other part of the ‘total situation.’

We can never understand the total situation without taking into account the evolving situation. And when a situation changes we have not a new variation under the old fact, but a new fact" (Thompson 2003).

The US needs to see the world as it is: not characterized by solidarism (progressive – Kant) but by pluralism (conservative – Grotius), which is itself characterized by the “centrality of inter-state consensus to international order, the significance of ethical diversity (or pluralism) amongst states, and the fragility of normative progress” (Murray 2015: 3). Pluralism focuses on “minimalist rules” and “protection of national sovereignty” (ibidem). Coexistence between states and finding the lowest common denominator between them are key to “creat(e) a framework for orderly coexistence and competition, or possibly also the management of collective problems of common fate that concern the ‘existence’ part of coexistence” (Buzan 2014: 89).

Contrary to solidarism, pluralism is not about shared norms, values or institutions: “solidarism most commonly manifests itself in a commitment to universal human rights of the sort associated with landmark international declarations, treaties and covenants as the most politically prominent and theoretically dominant version of [...] cosmopolitanism” (Williams 2015: 106). But an increasing number of emerging powers challenge the Western-based promotion of liberal values (democracy, human rights, ...). Even without President Trump, a return to the status quo ante would not be realistic and would not restore the Western-dominated rules-based order: “America will need to learn new rules and play differently in the new balance-of-power world, where others have assets and policies the US does not and cannot control” (Adams 2018). Indeed, the West wrongly assumed that Russia and China would

adopt the Western rules-based order. In fact, the liberal order has been considered a “club of the West” and has always been contested, but in a very timid way, because of the powerlessness of the others, and the asymmetric relationship of domination of the West vis-à-vis the rest. This asymmetrical relation has evolved in the last two decades and is increasingly symmetrical, because of the declining influence of and the fragility inside Western states on the one hand, and the rise of emerging powers and the political and economical alternatives they present for other states on the other hand (Acharya 2018).

The Western idea that the world could evolve towards a Kantian world has to be abandoned. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche rightly pointed out that “a state is called the coldest of all cold monsters”. Coming back to the fundamentals of Realpolitik has become a necessity, if a new stable global order is the objective. Because this international society is based on primary institutions,<sup>2</sup> it is also very fragile. Consequently, to “push the international society in any specific ‘progressive’ direction is a dangerous course of action” (Williams 2015: 105). The emphasis should be on Adam Watson’s term “*raison de système*”: “the idea that it pays to make the system work”; this should be the main objective (Watson in Buzan 2014: 18). By respecting cultural and ideological differences, the Bismarck model could bring stability and avoid a clash of civilizations or a hegemonic war, and guarantee the respect for and functioning of the primary institutions.

### 3. FUNCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Finally, states should develop functional leadership—“and that should correspond as exactly as possible with (its) capacity—and then (it) should have the authority and the responsibility which go with that function” (Thompson 2003: 84-85). Functional leadership

is relevant at the regional level, where the US should not delegate power (because “power to” is not transferable) but empower: “how much power they can themselves grow”, “how much they will be able to assume” (Thompson 2003: 87). Rather than delegating power, the objective is to delegate authority: authority should go with function (Thompson 2003: 191).

As the position of the US erodes, or at least its relative power decreases, it also has less influence at the regional level. To fill this void, the US increasingly has to rely on pivotal states (Chas, Hill & Kennedy 1996) to implement its grand strategy. These pivotal states will often be middle powers. Indeed, by virtue of their structural centrality, middle powers are well positioned to understand the challenges in the international system, due to their relations with great powers and their expertise on regional issues. Delegating to and sharing regional leadership with these pivotal states will be essential for the US in its demand to share burden, risk and blood. The policy will not be effective if leadership is only task-oriented. In this regard, a task-oriented leadership would decrease efficiency.

The US will have to grant these pivotal states some leeway, and take into consideration their points of view and demands and involve them in discussions regarding grand strategy. It is a triad “consisting of leaders and followers joined in a common purpose” (Chaleff 2003: 13). In the current distribution of power, middle powers have the opportunity to advance their political, economic and security goals. Classic top-down strategies may lead these states to feel disengaged from the leader and adopt deviant behaviour, even becoming swing states or worse, deviants. Followers should therefore be part of the strategic process, with responsibility in areas such as terrorism, maritime security, piracy, etc.: “Leadership is not defined by the

exercise of power but by the capacity to increase the sense of power among those led. The most essential work of the leader is to create more leaders” (Avolio & Reichard 2008: 325). By giving more autonomy to trusted followers, Washington can put in practice a policy of selective engagement on the regional chessboard. Such a strategy makes sense, since regional actors tend to better understand their region and its issues. It increases the sense of responsibility and fulfils the need for recognition of those states to which leadership is delegated (prestige-sharing). “Co-management” – the sharing of responsibility between the US and pivotal states (Berkes 1991: 12) – leads to greater interaction, increased collaboration and coordination.

## CONCLUSION

This form of American leadership, characterized by co-ordinating leadership of varying types and varying degrees, although less dominant would be more pragmatic, more acceptable to others, and far more subtle. The most effective leaders will have the least leading to do. Only a US grand strategy characterized by maintaining a world order structured around the US that gives more autonomy and responsibilities to others can be successful.

As Arendt explains, “Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is ‘in power’ we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with (potestas in populo, without a people or group there is no power), disappears, ‘his power’ also vanishes. In current usage, when we speak of a ‘powerful man’ or a ‘powerful personality’, we

already use the word 'power' metaphorically; what we refer to without metaphor is 'strength'" (Arendt 1970: 44).

If the United States wants to guarantee its leadership, it will have to empower others. If this does not work, "power over" will again take the upper hand, multiplying the risks. But, to quote Arendt again: "physical power is not the ultimate form of power. Quite the contrary, its use represents the failure of social power. Once the Sovereign has to draw their sword it is because the Leviathan has failed to create social

power. In a well-functioning Leviathan, this is a relatively infrequent occurrence compared with routine compliance. However, as observed by Arendt, a state that continually uses coercion against [other states] is actually relatively weak" (Arendt in Haugaard 2003: 107-108).

*Tanguy Struye de Swielande is Professor of International Relations at the Université catholique de Louvain and Director of the Centre d'études des crises et conflits internationaux (CECRI)*

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(1) Mary Parker Follett (1868-1933) is known for her writings in the field of management, organisational theory and power. Unfortunately, most of her writings, including on management and leadership theory, remain overlooked. Yet her contribution on the subject of leadership and power is significant, in particular her analysis of the expected behaviour of a leader for a successful business (See K. Thompson (Ed.), *The Early Sociology of Management and Organizations*, Volume III (Dynamic Administration, The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett, Edited by Henry C. Metcalf and L. Urwick), Routledge, London & New York, 2003).

(2) Bull developed five primary institutions: balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war, and great power management (H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*, London, Macmillan, 1977). These five are supposed to be the lowest common denominator to organise international society "in that they define not only the basic character of states but also their patterns of legitimate behaviour in relation to each other, as well as the criteria for membership of international society. The classical 'Westphalian' set consists of sovereignty, territoriality, the balance of power, war, diplomacy, international law and great power management, to which could be added nationalism" (Buzan, op.cit.: 17).

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