ALONE IN THE WORLD WITH CHIP ON OUR SHOULDER
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Some Americans agree. "The way things are going, it will soon be the United States against the world," one top leader in Malaysia captured the world's sentiment with a headline proclaiming: "We are all Americans." Ten months later, the American image is increasingly perceived as ugly, and support for U.S. foreign policy is plummeting — in response to such U.S. actions as the threat last week to withdraw aid to Malaysia unless Americans are exempted from jurisdiction of the new International Criminal Court.

Of course, anti-Americanism isn't new, but what I found disturbing after 35 years of visiting these cities was that foreign leaders who have been longtime friends of the United States are the ones voicing dismay.

While most foreign observers express affinity for Americans as people, they show increasing resentment of the United States as a nation and frequently remark, with regard to Sept. 11, that "now America knows what it feels like." They show satisfaction that, for once, America understands what it's like to be vulnerable. And they hope our tragedy might instill some humility and blunt American arrogance on issues such as energy conservation, global warming and global poverty.

Many people abroad are now convinced that the United States aims to control their destiny and that, despite its talk of democracy, human rights and free trade, it really thinks only of its own narrow interests. In Seoul, a study of Asia shows that the United States has undermined its moral suasion by cynically pursuing its national interests. In Malaysia, the White House welcomed Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir. Only a few years ago, Washington was lambasting Mahathir both for the imposition of capital market controls during the 1997 financial crisis and for human rights abuses in the killing of his deputy prime minister on charges of engaging in homosexual acts. Today, the former minister remains in jail and the capital markets remain somewhat restricted, but Mahathir is a hero in Washington because he's tough on terror. For some, the U.S. stance proves the ineptness of its proclaimed devotion to human rights and free trade.

Trade policies have reinforced the perception of U.S. arrogance and double standards. Generations of U.S.-Taiwanese traders who have exported paper, the European Union and others to reduce agricultural subsidies and to open their markets in politically sensitive areas such as computer chips, movies, beef and rice. Now, pleading political necessity, the United States has urged these nations by increasing its own agricultural subsidies and restricting steel and lumber imports.

Looming far above all other causes of alienation from America are two transcendent issues: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and American unilaterism.

The Gulf between the American view of the Middle East and that of virtually everyone else couldn't be wider. Americans tend to see Israel as an ally. The events of Sept. 11 and recent suicide bombings have only strengthened the close American identification with Israel. But people I met overseas, while condemning suicide bombing and sympathizing with the Israeli victims, also noted the fact that Palestinians have been under occupation of questionable legality for nearly 40 years. Everywhere I went, leaders emphasized that calling for an end to Palestinian violence without mentioning the Israeli expansion of settlements is unfair. Yet our friends abroad see the United States as unwilling, for domestic political reasons, to oppose or pressure Israel.

The United States often treats the Israeli-Palestinian dispute as a local conflict that can be contained, but it is spilling over. It is radicalizing attitudes in countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. Strategically important and traditionally practitioners of a liberal Islam, neither nation has significant economic or political ties to the Middle East. Yet, no controversy there can get past the Israeli-Palestinian situation that has caused many, including long-time friends of America, to conclude that the United States is attacking Islam itself.

The perception abroad of a new American unilateralism is even more serious. A number of U.S. actions — our rejection of the Kyoto treaty on global warming; refusal of initial offers of NATO help in Afghanistan; rejection of agreements to create an International Criminal Court, ban land mines and restrict chemical and biological warfare; as well as the U.S. declaration of a "first strike" policy that might include an attack on Iraq — have convinced foreign observers that the United States no longer feels any need to consult its friends or, indeed, any need for friends at all.
A top European business leader and former EU commissioner who has long been counted among America’s best friends said, “After World War II, America was all-powerful and created a new world by defining its national interest broadly in a way that made it attractive for other countries to define their interests in terms of embracing America’s.” In particular, the United States backed the creation of global institutions, due process and the rule of law.

“Now,” he said, “you are again all-powerful and the world is again in a period of restructuring but, without talking to anyone, you appear to be turning your back on things you have championed for half a century and defining your interest narrowly in terms of your own immediate military security.”

While America can’t make itself universally loved, a Mexican cabinet minister noted that it would be very costly to be universally disliked. “In an era of global interdependence, even a hyper-power needs friends,” he emphasized. The United States must pay more than lip service to others’ views. When the White House finds it necessary to swim against the stream of international opinion, it should explain why and offer alternatives.

Often, form matters as much as substance. As an editor in Tokyo noted, “Imagine how different the reaction to U.S. rejection of the Kyoto treaty would have been if the U.S. had explained the treaty’s flaws publicly and made a counterproposal, rather than just saying the treaty wasn’t good for the American economy.”

Congress could play an important role. It has extensive powers to advise and consent on foreign policy, as well as to direct funding. In exercising these powers, it holds extensive hearings. Yet it rarely calls foreign witnesses. Imagine having the U.S. trade representative and the European trade commissioner square off in front of a congressional committee. Congress and the American people would be better informed, while our friends overseas might feel less frustrated by dint of telling us publicly what they now only confide in private.

Most importantly, by paying more attention to its friends, America would avoid squandering precious goodwill and ensure that the global lineup will never be “America against the world.”

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