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Waving Hello to Democratic Renewal

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Waving Hello to Democratic Renewal

Abstract

Khanna's argument is simple. American hegemony and the unipolar world have collapsed—without America noticing. The new world is tri-polar. America must compete with Europe's soft power influence, and China's economic power influence. The new global game for the "second world" (Turkey, South America, the former USSR "Stans") is to play all three superpowers against each other, while pretending to be the friends of all.

Keywords

Human rights, Globalization, Democracy, World powers

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Waving Hello to Democratic Renewal

by Christine Bell

Khanna's argument is simple. American hegemony and the unipolar world have collapsed—without America noticing. The new world is tri-polar. America must compete with Europe's soft power influence, and China's economic power influence. The new global game for the "second world" (Turkey, South America, the former USSR "Stans") is to play all three superpowers against each other, while pretending to be the friends of all.

Let's leave aside whether Khanna is right. The arguments are well made and ring true at least as a broad brush account of the world's main powerblocks and how they operate. The question is—so what? Khanna ends by suggesting a fivefold task of re-thinking U.S. foreign policy. First, change the rhetoric: global interests in place of U.S. interests; "No more 'us' versus 'them' only 'we'." Second, more joined-up thinking and a regional approach to coordination of U.S. diplomacy. Third, deployment of "the marchmen" by increasing diplomatic missions and cultural initiatives to operate as "the foot soldiers of empire spreading values and winning loyalty." Fourth, making the global economy work for the U.S., by moving from a narrow evaluation of self-interest as served by isolationism. Fifth, to convene a meeting of the Big Three but suggest, rather than set, the agenda.

I am persuaded by the analysis. But I am not convinced by the prescription. Khanna's re-envisioning reads a little too much like the need for a "newspeak" and a less abrasive style of communication— U.S. foreign policy in a European accent. (Or perhaps the softer tones of Obama, Clinton, or McCain, in place of Bush's brass braying). Yet, as Khanna acknowledges, increased global influence will not be solved by a different accent or mere repackaging.

To convert style to substance another matter must be added to Khanna's list as item number one: namely, **internal democratic renewal within the US.**

Let me overstate my case and do so as an Irish European. Rightly or wrongly, we share Khanna's view of U.S. foreign policy as top-down and aggressive. We gasped in astonishment after September 11 th, as "ordinary Americans" agonised over how they had come to be so hated but with personal, rather than national, self-reflection. Was patriotism and military action the only appropriate response? Was there no space to engage in the existential nation-building deliberation that you seek of others who face conflict and violent threat?

Rightly or wrongly, we also view you as naïve about your own domestic situation. In Ireland, for example, we always loved America—its foreign policies were helpful here and we still owe a peace process debt. But that said, we often found visiting Americans hard to take. As they marvelled at and mediated our "ethnic conflict," those of us who had been to the U.S. for any length of time quietly wondered where they lived. How many of the white men that visited us went for walks in Harlem, sent their kids to public school in inner cities, or had white servants in their houses? How many had genuinely close friendships across ethnic groups, most notably the black/white divide?

As we watch your election campaign the two matters seem to be linked. We find ourselves wondering whether it matters who gets elected. There seems to be so little room to manoeuvre against interest blocks. To enter the race one appears to have to recalibrate personal politics against fixed political poles. We worry that the future trend of domestic and foreign policy choices is beyond political reach, set for decades ahead in all but the details. To point to greater deficits of the systems of others does not allay our concerns.

There is no European triumphalism here. Clearly, we are not perfect. Our foreign policy is as much a product of our own internal politics as yours. However, there is indeed perhaps a lesson in our particular relationship. Europe's soft-power approach in its foreign policy comes more from the difficulties for Europe in deciding what Europe is, than from clever strategic design. We do not have a constitutional consensus as to a concept of "Europe" that we can all subscribe to concomitant with a commitment to national states. Rather we have ongoing debate about what Europe is and should be, and a tension between periphery (states) and centre (Europe) to be ever-managed in a situation in which there is no default position capable of claiming a trumping authority. We have, in essence, an on-going crisis and overt public negotiation as to what it means to be "European." We forge foreign policy in the middle of this existential crisis as to how to reconcile our clashing political visions for our own shared future. The tension produces compromises and almost inevitably one of the few points of agreement is to on-going dialogue and pragmatic cooperation with neighbours. Soft power is one of the only forms of power we can agree to use, its soft edge crafted out of the difficulties of agreeing on when to use hard power.

And so I suggest that the inability to sell American values lies not just in the current difficulty of ascertaining those values, but in the limited political space in which to renegotiate them. There seems ever more limited room to consider what it means to be American, to be a liberal democrat, to be cosmopolitan—to truly belong to either local society or a global world. Unlike in Europe, articulating political uncertainty is subversive of the patriotic project rather than its accepted starting point. Until patriotism is understood to be served by democratic renewal that touches the heart of the U.S.'s deep political constitution, and this renewal becomes an imperative rather than wilderness cry of a few, foreign policy reform will be cosmetic. As an outsider I have no prescriptions: democratic renewal best comes from within and below.

But if Khanna really prompts us to search for our "inner Kennedy," then I am tempted to say: Ask not what your country will do (to the "other") for you, ask what you will do for your country so that the other ceases to be other.

*Christine Bell was born and brought up in Belfast. She is currently Director of the Transitional Justice Institute, and Professor of Public International Law at University of Ulster (based at Magee Campus). She read law at Selwyn College, Cambridge, (1988) and gained an LL.M in Law from Harvard Law School (1990), supported by a Harkness Fellowship. She has authored the book *Peace Agreements and Human Rights* (Oxford University Press 2000), and a report published by the International Council on Human Rights Policy entitled "Negotiating Justice? Human Rights and Peace Agreements" (2006). She has also taken part in various peace negotiations discussions, giving constitutional law and human rights law advice, and also in training for diplomats, mediators and lawyers.*