

[The Korea Times] Restoring US Credibility, Soft Power

This is the second in a "Letter to President Biden" series aimed at conveying policy recommendations in an open letter from politicians, scholars and experts to the new U.S. president following his Jan. 20 inauguration. – ED.

By Gareth Evans

January 28, 2021

Dear Mr. President,

You will be acutely aware that, after the ravages of the Trump years, you have a big healing job ahead of you not only at home but abroad. Too often in recent times America's allies, partners and friends around the world have found ourselves regarded as encumbrances rather than assets.

And, too often, we have seen states about whose behavior we have all been concerned – including China, Russia, the DPRK and Iran – treated in ways that have been unprincipled, unintelligent or unproductive.

Your own lifetime-attested instincts for decency, moderation and cooperation will serve you well in restoring America's lost soft power, and sensibly managing its still enormous hard power.

In particular, we must hope that the United States, with its huge intellectual and physical resources, will be again under your presidency a world leader in energizing, crafting and implementing solutions to global public goods problems, not least the three great existential risks to life on this planet as we know it – climate change, pandemics and nuclear war.

American leadership will be particularly crucial on nuclear weapons. You and we know that Trump-style content-free diplomatic vaudeville is useless. But serious efforts to get back to the negotiating table with both the DPRK and Iran – employing real carrots as well as sticks – have every prospect of bearing fruit.

Similarly with Russia on New START and the other bilateral arms control agreements now dead, dying or fragile. But please set your sights higher than just holding the line against proliferation and avoiding a new arms race among the existing nine nuclear-armed states, as important as this will be. What the world

most needs from Washington is to get serious again – as President Obama at least tried to be – about actual nuclear disarmament.

Getting to global zero won't happen any time soon: Verification and enforcement are showstoppers for the foreseeable future, even if the geopolitics becomes more accommodating. But serious steps in that direction are possible with the right will: De-alerting, reduced deployments, dramatically decreased weapons numbers, and doctrinal agreement on "no first use" would be huge risk reduction measures.

And Washington can and should show the way on every one of them. When Obama tried, in effect, to embrace a retaliation-only no first use policy, he was resisted not only by most of the military establishment but by a slew of anxious East Asian and NATO allies still clinging to the illusory comfort of "extended nuclear deterrence." This time round, please Mr. President, stare them down!

The biggest single foreign policy challenge of your term will be navigating a modus vivendi with China – ever larger, more powerful and more assertive in claiming its place in the world. Sliding further into confrontational Cold War, with the slim but not impossible risk of it becoming catastrophically hot, makes no sense to your allies and friends, and shouldn't to you.

China is not the Soviet Union: It is not going to implode any time soon, its Communist Party leadership has no evident ambition for global ideological dominance, and it is joined at the wallet, to our mutual benefit, with a legion of other economies, including the United States and Australia.

That does not mean any of us should become Beijing's patsy: kowtowing on the South China Sea, not fighting often discriminatory trade and industrial policies, not resisting undue influence, and ignoring egregious domestic human rights violations.

Pushback on these and other fronts is necessary (and should not just take the form of enlisting an "alliance of democracies": States like Vietnam are important counterweight players in this context). But there are limits to what external pressure can achieve with a country of China's weight, particularly on human rights issues.

The best hope for moderating China's behavior is to acknowledge the legitimacy and inevitability of at least some of its international aspirations, minimizing our rhetorical stridency and not getting overly agitated that it wants strategic space, the military capacity to protect its economic lifelines, and a level of global policymaking influence commensurate with its new strength.

It should also be productive to focus hard on global public goods issues where there is potentially strong common ground with your administration: Climate change, peacekeeping, counter-terrorism, nuclear and other arms control, and even pandemics (in the case of Ebola) are all areas where China has played a more interested, constructive, and potentially cooperative role than generally recognized.

Some final more general thoughts. You hardly need reminding that optics matter, and in that spirit you might wish to be very careful about invoking any of the "p" words – primacy, predominance, pre-eminence – which these days are calculated to counter-productively irritate not only America's adversaries but your friends. Whether any of us like it or not – and a great many of your own citizens certainly will not want to hear it said – America's unipolar moment is over.

In winning understanding and acceptance of this uncomfortable new reality, it might be worth channeling some words, both provocative and prescient, that I heard Bill Clinton utter – privately – nearly two decades ago: "America's choice should be to use our great economic and military power not to try to stay top dog in perpetuity, but to help create a world in which we will be comfortable living when we are no longer top dog on the global block."

Americans are not alone in wanting their political leaders to be overwhelmingly preoccupied with protecting and advancing their own, not other states', national interests. But you might find it helpful to make clear in your domestic advocacy that not all national interests can be readily defined in terms of immediate security and prosperity returns: There is a strong case for characterizing, as a third category of national interest, "being and being seen to be a good international citizen."

When so many problems these days – not just the big three existential risks but a multitude of others including refugee flows, piracy, cross-border crime, and sometimes mass atrocity crimes – are transnational in character, capable of resolution only through cooperative action, being willing to help solve public goods problems that are sometimes more immediately troubling to other states than your own brings its own reputational and reciprocity rewards. Acting that way is a strategy not just for idealists, but hard-headed realists.

Mr. President, there is an enormous global hunger for the United States to be once again a good international citizen, with the quality of its democracy, and the integrity and competence of its governance a source of attraction rather than revulsion. There is every confidence that under your leadership it will be just that.

I'm sure you won't let us down.

Most respectfully,
Gareth Evans

Gareth Evans is chair of the Asia Pacific Leadership Network on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN). He was previously Australia's foreign minister (1988-96), president of the International Crisis Group (2000-09) and chancellor of the Australian National University (2010-19).