Who Can Fill the Power Gap US Abuses Have Created?

Relationships between states differ over time, depending on a wide variety of factors. Poland was warmly welcomed into the EU when it got rid of Communism, but its veer towards an unpleasant form of nationalism now makes it a less than desirable partner. Tens of thousands of Portuguese died to kick the French out of their country, and now French citizens have an automatic right to live there.

There was a time when Uncle Sam was welcomed everywhere. The US did not develop its enormous sphere of influence by imposing it (in most cases), but by being a partner or sponsor which offered something others wanted. Only over time did a situation develop where many US partners only put up with it because they have to, against a background of simmering resentment in the local population, who are fed up with the disconnect between the US stands for and what it actually does.

The dream is still there, but it is becoming increasingly difficult for the US to persuade its partners that the dream is worth the reality. Even before Trump alienated everyone he was supposed to be friends with, governments were actively seeking new directions, disguised as aid, technical assistance and global partnership.

This should create a gap another country can walk into. Any country or alliance should be able to sell itself as offering something better than the US to locals who have come to feel trapped.

For example, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, overtly aimed at the US and its supposed puppets, happened practically overnight, and most of Ayatollah Khomeini’s followers had only heard his name a few weeks before the events. No one pretended the revolution would make Iran richer or more popular with the outside world, but it brought back
values people understood and respected, rather than those they considered alien, imposed by force by illegitimate rulers and their foreign sponsors.

Yet the American Dream is still persuading far more countries to stay asleep than anything offered by an alternative force, which wants them to wake up to a new reality.

So does any country have the capacity to present a better dream? There never used to be one. But now, thanks to the failures of others, an opportunity has opened up for a once very unlikely pretender.

One country ticks all the boxes the US does, but offers a better deal. With its allies, it is big enough to take over the US sphere in the same way China has taken over much of the old Soviet sphere in the Far East. Its main task now is to become the acknowledged leader of those allies – but if it manages that, the possibilities may be endless, and many nations will rejoice.

**Achilles Heels**

The US has ruined many friendships, let alone countries, by promoting its short sighted idea of the “American interest”. If the locals are powerless to right historic wrongs, the US can do as it likes.

But the relatively brief history of the US blinds it to the fact that other countries have long memories, which are part of their identity. As statehood is usually created on the basis of selective memory, the US will eventually find itself the partner nobody wants, without having any idea why.

The US does however have a larger community of interest with other countries than its behaviour towards them would suggest. Most countries want democracy, rule of law, common decency, prosperity, influence and global cultural reach. So do most of their citizens.

Russia is a growing economic and political power, and simply too big to ignore, as the constant Russia-bashing testifies. But it presents realpolitik – considered as arm-twisting by some. It doesn’t have the democratic traditions of the US or Western countries, being still labelled an autocracy at heart, regardless of how democratic its institutions actually are.

China has become notorious by buying up the infrastructure of as many countries as it can – which makes it far more of a threat to those countries than Russia could ever be. You can’t use that infrastructure for anything China doesn’t want when China actually owns it.

But China has additional problems – despite its economic success, its language is even further removed from the global standard of Latin script than Russia’s – and even Russia has Arabic numerals.

In the East, through the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation or alone, China can reign supreme. But for the more powerful and economically significant West, the Chinese are too different to make their country a partner they can actually work with – as the preponderance of Chinese takeaways, rather than corporations, in Western countries testifies.

The EU is the closest alternative to the US, in terms of claimed values, democratic traditions and economic power. But what exactly is it? As a union of 27 states, it has no obvious leader or centre of power, and its structures are so balanced and arcane that very few people know who does what – which has created the myth of the unaccountable monolith which Brexiteers objected to.

To effectively co-operate with the EU you have to actually join it, and be part of its labyrinth of institutions. Even then you face a subdivision based on wealth and democratic tradition, as its newer members have found.

The EU has much to offer as a friend and source of aid, but nothing as a potential model. It can never expand beyond the borders of Europe, or offer a pathway to a better life for countries which can never join it. To most of the world it will always be as foreign as China, and it can’t offer either the military protection or political influence the US, Russia or China can.

So who else have we got? The Arab League could be a significant force, if it bothered to do anything. This organisation should be the bulwark against militant Islam which the US pretends to be. It also represents people widely recognised as dispossessed, and should therefore be able to claim the moral high ground in international forums, and the influence that goes with that.
But again the Arab League falls down on the democratic standpoint. It is also too insular to be able to spread its influence too far. Jordan may be the model moderate state in the Middle East, but that has no relevance outside it. Lebanon has a historically effective system which no one else will allow to work because they cannot import it to their own countries, and thus can only be a playground rather than a partner.

Whether we like it or not, any nation or alliance which wants to lead the world has to have democratic traditions, respect for rule of law, and longstanding connections with the West which make it understandable. This description used to remind people of someone, but due to its own internal issues that folk memory got lost. Only now, and for all the wrong reasons, does it have the chance to re-establish and surpass its previous influence, provided it puts itself in the right hands.

Forgotten Language

Remember the Commonwealth of Nations? When the UK was a more important player, this collection of its former colonies was too. But the mere fact that it still exists demonstrates it is more important, and more capable, than many people realise.

It is common for former colonial powers to try and keep their ex-colonies in some sort of formal relationship with them. It beats treating them as equals. It also means they won’t go over to a rival for the sake of it, threatening the colonial power’s investments and influence, and the resources they always feel they need.

We have seen these “empire lite” bodies come and go. The Commonwealth of Independent States is little more than words. The French Community collapsed because it was more French than Community, even though its constituent nations were quite happy with that if it meant they didn’t have to do any work.

The member states of the Commonwealth often fought bloody wars of national liberation against the British Empire, or at least agitated for independence. Yet they remain united in a body whose nominal head is the British monarch.

This is not due to “common cultural heritage”, as the basis of their claim for independence was that the British were foreign occupiers. It is because the United Kingdom represented democracy, rule of law, tolerance, economic power and international influence, at least within its own borders. All the things the new countries wanted to be, the UK was, and continuing British influence, and British guarantees of their independence, was the fastest track to getting there.

As time went on, the UK turned to new friends such as the EU, and the Commonwealth nations asserted their own priorities, which were largely about protecting their independence and finding their own solutions. The British, and their more successful former colonies, grew disenchanted with this historical relic, but its poorer members still saw it as a path to influence they didn’t otherwise have.

The Commonwealth became a club of poor nations trying to bite as loud as they barked – to the general disinterest of the rest of the world. Yet still the glamour of what the UK was held to represent bound the Commonwealth together, because the new friends its members had developed independently couldn’t replicate it.

Two things have changed that. Firstly, in a little heralded move, Mozambique joined the Commonwealth in 1995. This was a former Portuguese colony, never part of the British Empire. Mozambique retains its Lusophone connections, but the values of the Commonwealth, and its geographical spread, are having relevance outside its traditional borders.

Secondly, the UK has become a plague infested island run by Boris Johnson. People want what they used to think it stood for, not what it has become.

Brexit dreams of the UK exploiting its old colonies like it used to are being dashed every day, as even the poorest Commonwealth members don’t want to be seen signing trade agreements with the British of all people. Stick with them out of necessity yes, embrace them as partners in the modern world, no.

The Commonwealth is no longer led by the UK but by its values – the same ones the US has built its own empire-i-all-but-name by representing. If those values can take on a tangible form – i.e. a particular country can embody them and take over Commonwealth leadership – the Commonwealth is better placed than any other international organisation to offer disgruntled US allies, which includes most Commonwealth members, a way out.

Crossing the Rubicon
So which country can do that? It has to be a rich one, with a long democratic tradition. It has to have a good reputation with Western countries, and particularly English-speaking ones, but still respect the native traditions of those countries, allowing them to develop their own way, but within a common framework of values both local politicians and their populations understand and respect.

It has to be a nation which has traditionally been on the right side of history, not bringing with it baggage others might find unacceptable. This leaves out South Africa for example, despite its wealth and very much different system of today.

Australia might have a claim, but it isn’t interested. It’s also too far away, and has too many complexes – as comedian Tony Hancock once put it, “Australia has broken away from Mother England and is now standing on its own four feet”. New Zealand has fewer complexes, but is even further away, unless it suddenly improves its economy 1,000%, and sends armies all over.

Neither India nor Pakistan would allow the other to lead the Commonwealth, and they are still seen as poor countries, and Asian – you might as well sell everything to China instead. The emerging economies of Africa still have too far to go to claim any enduring leadership role, and their sponsors will never let them, any more than China will let Mongolia or Vietnam think for themselves.

Only one Commonwealth country ticks all the boxes, has the influence and economic reach to take leadership of it, and will be welcomed by any potential partner. Stand up Canada, and particularly the Canada of Justin Trudeau, tradition and modernity rolled into one.

Canada has the reach, it has the muscle and it has the glamour. No longer does it live in the shadow of the US or UK, after the mess those two have made. If it only has the self-belief to do it, it can reshape the world order in a way most will find highly acceptable, before it collapses and crushes us all.

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