Leadership and post-Cold War European security

A series of attempts have been made since the end of the Cold War to make sense of the much changed international system. Francis Fukuyama’s ‘The End of History’, ¹ Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilisations’, ² Aron Wildavsky’s zones of conflict and zones of peace and Michael Doyle’s observations on liberal states’³ propensity not to engage in conflict with each other, are prime examples. Many of the ideas were driven by key articles, greeted as seminal, but like a young child with a new toy, they were soon discarded. Not unnaturally, theorising about the shape of the international system focused on the US role in the post-Cold War world. Two works in particular fuelled much of what became known as the declinist debate. First, Paul Kennedy’s book ‘The Rise and The Fall of The Great Powers’, speculated about whether the US would fall prey to modern variants of imperial over-stretch, whereby ‘Great Powers in relative decline instinctively respond by spending more on “security” and thereby divert potential resources from “investment” and compound their long-term dilemma’.⁴ In the same year that Kennedy’s book appeared, David Calleo’s equally provocative Beyond American Hegemony: The Future of the Western Alliance⁵ was published. Calleo argued that post-Cold War NATO was ‘essentially an American protectorate for Europe. As such, it is increasingly unviable’. Calleo further contended that it was global shifts that introduced fundamentally changed distributions of resources and power and that ‘even if the fundamental common interests of the United States and Western Europe dictate a continuation of the Atlantic Alliance... the old hegemonic arrangements cannot continue without becoming self-destructive’.⁶
Unsurprisingly, mainly American academics rejected declinist arguments, continuing to believe that stability still rested largely upon America's enduring and unique ability to lead. This view found its main proponent in Joseph Nye's *Bound to Lead*, in which Nye argued that in the absence of firm hegemonic leadership, instability or even chaos could ensue. Nye contended that the 'Twin dangers that Americans face are complacency about the domestic agenda and the unwillingness to invest in order to maintain confidence in their capacity for international leadership. Neither is warranted. The United States remains the largest and richest world power with the greatest capacity to shape the future'.

The changes in resources and power, to which Calleo refers to and which Nye disputes, depend very much upon which benchmark is used to measure relative decline or stability.

The Cold War in western Europe was marked not only by the provision of US leadership and resources, but by the assumption that the defence of the US began in Europe. The end of the Cold War brought out significant contrasts in America's position, especially in its relative economic power, as it could no longer claim 45 percent of the world's economy as in did in 1945. As the contemporary international system posed no compelling or overt military threat to the US, or its European allies, inevitably the willingness of the US to lead and the receptiveness of its allies to leadership from across the Atlantic, was questioned. Although it would be inaccurate to portray the Cold War years as bereft of differences between the allies (Suez comes to mind), the gravity of the consequences of disagreements were circumscribed by the over-arching Soviet military threat. The end of the Cold War removed this constraint, most notably with reference to relations with third parties and trade.

Moreover, disputes between the European allies and the US on a wide range of issues were compounded by post-Cold War diversification of national agendas in the absence of the unifying Soviet threat. For instance, the tensions between leadership in foreign policy and the domestic agenda, fuelled by unrealistic expectations of a sizeable 'peace dividend', became evident in American politics. The familiar question of orientation across the Channel or the Atlantic engaged politics in Britain. The 'new German question' was a prominent debate in France. The social and literal costs of reunification preoccupied Germany while coping with traumatic adjustments to the realities of market economies and post-communist regimes engaged Central and Eastern Europe. Russia was absorbed in coming to terms with the realities of its loss of superpower status and the tension between reformers and nationalists. These revolutions, adaptations and adjustments had a dramatic effect.