"Leading Through Civilian Power" or Creeping Inertia?

The State Department's *First Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review* (QDDR) offers no credible vision for global US leadership

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The QDDR, entitled "Leading Through Civilian Power", seeks to move beyond the neoconservative doctrine of the Bush years and outlines a renewed form of US leadership focusing on 'civilian power'. Yet, it reproduces a narrow geopolitical vision of America's global role, modeled on military thinking, which falls short of the transformation required.

In December 2010, Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, launched the first ever *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Report* (QDDR) entitled *Leading Through Civilian Power* with the goal of maintaining "the State Department, USAID, and every element of our civilian power at the cutting edge of global leadership". The report was modeled on the US Department of Defense's *Quadrennial Defense Review*. As such, it is the major policy document outlining the worldview and diplomatic strategy of the administration. As the Obama administration slouches towards conflict with Iran, steps back from the Israel-Palestine peace process, and rejects out of hand any notion of a Tobin Tax on international finance, it is worth reviewing this landmark document.

In the month of its release, the Secretary of State penned an article on Civilian Power in *Foreign Affairs* and the issue in question also featured Joseph Nye arguing (quite convincingly) that the US retains superior resources and capabilities over any potential challengers. However, severe question marks remain over the political direction of America and the vision of its establishment. We find the QDDR quite unconvincing in this respect. Even the major concept of the document is taken (without attribution) from European Union academic discourse; a minor transgression admittedly, but one which symbolizes a deeper intellectual poverty in the document. The report is emblematic of an increasingly inward-looking America and offers no remotely credible vision of US leadership in a rapidly transforming world. The fact that it comes from a democratic administration, which espouses progressive internationalism, makes this all the more striking.

In the report, Civilian Power is described as

> the combined force of women and men across the U.S. government who are practicing diplomacy, implementing development projects, strengthening alliances and partnerships, preventing and responding to crises and conflict, and advancing America's core interests […] These civilians ask one question again and again: How can we do a better job of advancing the interests of the American people? (p. ii)

In fact this term is not a new one, and has long been in use in academic and policy circles. In 1972, François Duchêne first used the term to describe and lay out a future vision for the global identity and role of an integrating (Western) Europe. It has since evolved as the key paradigm for Europe's collective role in the world (this may not be a good omen in itself as the European Union has flattered to deceive on the global stage, most would admit). The academic literature outlines three meanings to the term

1. As an instrument: civilian methods (normally using economic or cultural instruments) for achieving foreign policy goals;
2. As a description of a particular actor;
3. A concept for the 'civilianization' of international politics;

Key to the last point has been a commitment to multilateralism, international institutions in general and supranational integration.

The QDDR strips the term of these wider meanings and connotations and instrumentalizes it for invoking a more amiable image of the US's role in the world. The reading of civilian power refers exclusively to the first meaning: civilian means for foreign policy implementation. Even in term of this third meaning it is a very 'thin' understanding. Civilian power is crudely juxtaposed alongside the US military: "it is the civilian side of the government working as one, just as our military services work together as a unified force" (p. ii). Such statements strike us as bizarre and only serve to emphasize the extent to which military thinking has dominated US foreign policy. There is no sense of a change in America's geopolitical framework, no deeper concept of the polity as a *civic* entity, civilianizing international relations more generally. America's civilian power is intended to strengthen the US's global credibility by conducting foreign policy through civilians and civilian means, thereby dispelling more negative images of the US. Essentially the report reworks ideas of soft power, under a different label without (re)cognition of what the label entails and means. The lack of a developed (or properly attributed concept) may not be in itself of great importance but this superficiality and insularity also pervades the more substantial areas of the report.

The best example of the QDDR's limitations is its treatment of development policy. It is a truism that development is a major vector of diplomacy in the contemporary world. Development is a policy area which encapsulates a combination of idealistic (the one-worldist vision of a global community) and enlightened self-interest. Apart from the immediate economic and security benefits it may bring, development aid is also a major part of a broader effort (which now appears to be failing) of embedding the global neoliberal economy, through institutions such as the WTO, IMF and the World Bank. Development policy is one of the more advanced areas of global governance and there has been extensive international cooperation on this issue. Clinton emphasizes that it is "time to elevate development as a central pillar of our foreign policy" (p. 75). However, this document positions the US as an outlier within, rather than a leader of, the global community.

Curiously (to the objective reader), the development chapter of the QDDR has little emphasis on global institutions. Noteworthy here is the agreement on the Millennium Development Goals

(MDGs), which are mentioned only twice (with absolutely no detail given or further discussion) in this 213 page document. Although it may be criticized in terms of conception and implementation the MDG agenda and targets, agreed in 2000, exemplify the commitment of the developed world to the poor and are the foremost articulation of global solidarity. How a document which claims to position the US as a global leader can deal with them in such a perfunctory fashion is baffling. Cooperation with other donors is discussed as one of the core USAID principles and this is related to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (signed by the major aid donors in 2005). This Declaration was about reducing the costly bureaucracy of aid donors and also part of an effort to develop greater strategic coordination between donors. However, the overwhelming focus in the QDDR is on cooperation between the different elements of the US government and on a coherent integrated US strategy, rather than a coherent international development strategy. Of course it is only to be expected that a US government document will privilege the role of American institutions, but nevertheless the reluctance to discuss global cooperative structures and agreements at any length is disappointing.

The report also seeks to justify development aid to a skeptical American audience, which, as the document outlines, has a grossly inflated view of the amount the US government spends on overseas aid. Naturally, the document was written for an American audience; but of course the audience is not just American and this defensiveness gives an unfortunate impression. Development is primarily codified as a means of re-establishing American leadership and serving the interest of the American economy and people. In the preface, Clinton underlines that "it's ultimately about delivering results for the American people—protecting our interests and projecting our leadership in the 21st century" (p. vi). USAID is ascribed a lead role as the "world's preeminent development agency" and, alongside the State Department, as the key agency to continue a "long history of successfully advancing America's interest abroad" (p. iii). This reinforces the impression that development aid does not focus on needs assessments but on the strategic importance of states. Moreover, USAID officially positioning "development" in such instrumental terms for advancing American interests must be discomfiting to its cooperation partners in the Global South (who increasingly have other, non-Western, options for sources of finance). Also, one wonders what they make of the imagery of American development experts as the saviors of poor, passive populations of the Global South. The start of the executive summary reads as follows:

> Somewhere in the world today, a jeep winds its way through a remote region of a developing country. Inside are a State Department diplomat with deep knowledge of the area's different ethnic groups and a USAID development expert with long experience helping communities lift themselves out of poverty. They are on their way to talk with local councils about a range of projects—a new water filtration system, new ways to elevate the role of women in the community, and so on—that could make life better for thousands of people while improving local attitudes towards the United States.

The US' expertise in bringing "countries and peoples together as only America can" (p. vi) is frequently highlighted, but it appears oblivious to postcolonial sensitivities and critiques of the paternalism of Western development practices—despite the undeniable impact those critiques had on the practices of development institutions (including American ones).

The QDDR process was led by Anne-Marie Slaughter, a world renowned international relations theorist, who was head of the State Department Policy Unit until February 2011.The broader geopolitical vision of the document does place a greater stress on interdependence, global challenges such as climate change, and global and regional institutions, than would have been the case in the Bush era. There are interesting ideas on mobilizing non-governmental social forces and gearing the US government towards working more with regional institutions. Anne-Marie Slaughter has published widely on the role of interdependence and transgovernmental networks in the evolving world order. Such concepts offer a counter-narrative of progress, globalization, and mutual gains to traditional geopolitical fears and security dilemmas. However, the instrumental nature in which they are used in this document denudes their potential to develop a genuinely transformative vision. These elements are subsumed into a narrow, insular, and sometimes mediocre conception of US interests, obscuring the broader vision of a transforming world. Generally, a major element of 'cooperation' concerns cooperation between different US government agencies. The section on "building a new global architecture" is mostly concerned with organizational restructuring within the State Department. The shadow of the Pentagon looms ever present; the section on working with regional institutions feels the need to privilege the role of US regional military commands. These are double-edged instruments of diplomacy to say the least. It is not at all clear whether diplomats seeking to build these new transgovernmental networks will find associating with the likes of Central Command and Africa Command a help or a hindrance.

The adoption of the 'civilian power' concept reflects the Obama administration's realization that Bush's image as a neoconservative, militaristic, unilateralist leader was detrimental to the legitimacy and credibility of the US as a global leader. It seeks to portray itself as a global leader rather than an embattled superpower. But there is no credible vision outlined herein. The report, as with the Obama administration more generally, is caught between two stools. It invokes a more "civilian" worldview than in the Bush years but lacks the confidence and swagger of previous administrations and does not even hint at any kind of transformational diplomacy. The report fails to *really* move beyond unilateralism and thus amounts to a mere 'tweaking' of its diplomatic and geopolitical strategy. There is no indication of the US government's ability to position the US as a global leader rather than a unilateral superpower – despite a rapidly changing world around it.

The irony, of course, is that the US was the civilian power par excellence (in the instrumental sense of the term) in the post-World War Two period, through its development of international institutions and its pervasive cultural hegemony. The narrowing perspective of the US political system, and the US Congress in particular, has greatly reduced its potency here. Chronic insularity (which is also a feature of the EU, the other self-styled civilian power) is exhibited throughout this report. The need to justify development aid to a skeptical public leads to a formulation that induces

rather than dispels perceptions of American unilateralism, paternalism, and neo-imperialism. Likewise the need to pander to the military (which, however powerful, is a clumsy and unusable tool in many world regions) is a major constraint. This is not a criticism of the drafters, who are naturally responding to political and institutional imperatives. In that sense, the report simply reflects the inertia of the US political establishment. America's capabilities remain formidable; its ideas less so.