

America's Influence
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America's ability to direct or control global or even regional events is declining, but so too is the ability of every other nation. The world itself has changed, from a closed to an open system. In closed systems, events are predictable and linear. In an open system, as Capt. Wayne Porter and Col. Mark Mykleby argue in "A National Strategic Narrative for the United States," very small perturbations create very large and nonlinear results. The self-immolation of a vegetable seller in Tunisia sets off a conflagration that brings down governments across the Arab world. The Federal Reserve's decision to let one investment bank fail nearly brought the global financial system to a complete stop.

Of course, the world of foreign affairs was never truly closed, but the bipolar world of the Cold War was closed enough to sustain the illusion of control. That illusion is forever shattered, or should be. In an open system, notions of primacy or even dominance are nonsensical. The best the United States can hope for is "credible influence," the ability to guide other nations through the appeal of our values, the power of our example, and the strength of our economy and political system. To build up that influence, we must invest less in our military and more in diplomacy and development, less in protectionism and more in competitiveness, less in strutting on the world stage and more in living up to our values. That is the right narrative for the coming decades. But all is hardly lost. Even today, in the chaos of an open system, the United States is still the most influential power in the world. Let us review some of the things that would probably not have happened just over the past two years without U.S. participation: The creation of the G-20. The conclusion of a Climate Accord in Copenhagen. A nuclear arms treaty with Russia. The rebuff of Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. U.N. intervention in Libya. Still, the paradox remains. To maintain its influence abroad, the United States must renew itself at home.