

Address by David Howell to 200 persons audience at the Foreign Policy Association lunch, at the Harvard Club, during UN General Assembly week'. New York

When it comes to world leadership, the theme of our conference, I bring good news and bad news to this audience.

The good news is that the USA remains far the most successful world economy, with the biggest financial, commercial and indeed, cultural footprint across the planet, as well as being the world's largest oil producer!

The bad news is that the new kind of transformed network world in which we now live requires an utterly different kind of leadership from the kind the US has sought to provide in the past or is providing now.

A network world, where every country, every interest, every region, every locality is connected up is a great equaliser. The old hierarchy model does not work. Gone are the days of American primacy, when overwhelming force, shock and awe, and sheer military weight were the instruments of power or the way to take the lead.

In the digital age it is the incredible web of networks, the lattice-work of constant connectivity operating across every continent and at every level of society, which provides the means to safeguard security and prosperity, and the means of securing promoting national interests and giving an effective lead.

There are good and bad networks and cells.

The best can be the new means, for what is labelled – misleadingly in my view - soft power through which influence and impact are now transmitted.

In Britain we are slowly learning this lesson. We are moving away from the old discredited EU model of political integration and protectionism and working out how to survive and prosper in an entirely different world. We are developing a new cats-cradle of bilateral links and relationships in all kinds of areas, not just governmental but professional, educational, scientific, medical, cultural and of course trade in its modern guise, which is increasingly through services and on-line data transmissions.

One of our most promising networks in this new world, utterly neglected but recently re-discovered, is the gigantic system of likeminded Commonwealth countries, all with a common working language, similar legal and accountancy systems and ,except in one or two cases, common values and attitudes. We see it very much as a family, although even families have awkward members

Today's Commonwealth contains a thirds of the whole human race – 2.4 billion souls - -a bigger network even than China. It contains some of the world's smallest and poorest states but also some of the fastest growing and dynamic. India, Malaysia, Australia, your neighbour, Canada, Nigeria, South Africa, Singapore come to mind.

And Africa is rising as well. These are the regions which are growing into some of the biggest middle income consumer markets in history.

Looking at the world in this new way puts some of the nastiest global problems in perspective.

The USA is still our best friend and partner, but you are not our boss – no-one is in the new international network system.

Russia is a weak state temporarily empowered by using cyber technologies and digital weapons, and warped James Bond versions of poisoning and assassination. With a GDP smaller than Italy, two thirds of the UK and fifth of the USA, it is simply relying on temporarily high oil and gas revenues, and a lot of implausible – and often ludicrous - propaganda, to make its mark.

Russia is far feeble than Stalinist USSR and has no great cause or creed to offer followers, as Communism once did.

China spends a fortune on trying to promote its 'soft power image, including through its Confucius and Mencius outreach operations in many countries and including through heavy infrastructure investment across the continents – through its BRI, its Africa investments, its port-building, its new railways, its property purchases and much else besides.

This kind of 'soft' penetration is seen by Beijing as far more effective than in extending Chinese 'power' than conventional hard power advance -although China is not averse to some of that in the China South Seas.

None of this Chinese expansionism, signalled by Xi Jinping – is going to be countered by conventional military means such as missiles or invasions, or even my trade wars. It is minds that have to be won over to the better story the democracies can offer. And we have to do that not by lecturing the world on how the Western powers are so superior – our tired systems and brands of democracy may not be – but by the most subtle new forms of diplomacy.

As for the tortured Middle East the new age lessons from there should be clear by now. Humanitarian, educational, technical and soft power support should be given to the full to these fragile or collapsed societies. That may eventually pay off.

But heavy political and military intervention won't. Let the Russians sink into their own quagmire (even inside Russia they are complaining about what they see as expensive and pointless Middle East region involvement).

Let our alliances be with peaceful Islam, not the violent strain, which we all need to do everything, domestically and internationally together, to snuff out.

We all have to play the long game, because in the end our liberal values have more staying power than the autocracies or the old extreme ideologies of the twentieth century.

But it will all require a lot of patience, a lot of understanding, a lot of respect for newer and advancing nations, and a truly deep grasp of the new revolutionary new trends and patterns of behaviour which the digital age and the cyber age have imposed on us all.

And of that, I fear, there seem not much evidence amongst our rulers or leaders at present.