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## America and the Great Abdication

Don't mistake Donald Trump's withdrawal from the world for isolationism.



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When great powers fade, as they inevitably must, it's normally for one of two reasons. Some powers exhaust themselves through overreach abroad, underinvestment at home, or a mixture of the two. This was the case for the Soviet Union. Other powers lose their privileged position with the emergence of new, stronger powers. This describes what happened with France and Great Britain in the case of Germany's emergence after World War I and, more benignly, with the European powers and the rise of the United States during and after World War II.

To some extent America is facing a version of this—amid what Fareed Zakaria has dubbed “the rise of the rest”—with China’s ascendance the most significant development. But the United States has now introduced a third means by which a major power forfeits international advantage. It is abdication, the voluntary relinquishing of power and responsibility. It is brought about more by choice than by circumstances either at home or abroad.

Abdication is not isolationism. Donald Trump’s United States is not isolationist. He has authorized the use of limited military force against the Syrian government in a manner his predecessor rejected. U.S. military operations have gone a long way toward defeating ISIS in both Syria and Iraq. The Trump administration might employ force against Iran or North Korea, or both, and has pressed for and secured new international sanctions against the latter. It could well act (most likely unilaterally) in the economic realm, applying tariffs or sanctions as it sees fit against one or another trading partner. It is trying its hand (thus far without success) at mediating several disputes in the Middle East. The U.S. military effort in Afghanistan is to be extended and possibly augmented.

But abdication describes U.S. foreign policy all the same, as the United States is no longer taking the lead in maintaining alliances, or in building regional and global institutions that set the rules for how international relations are conducted. It is abdication from what has been a position of leadership in developing the rules and arrangements at the heart of any world order.

For three-quarters of a century, from World War II through the Cold War and well into the post-Cold War era, the United States was the principal architect and builder of global rules. This is not to say that the United States always got it right; it most certainly did not, at times because of what it did, at other times because of what it chose not to do. But more often than not, the United States played a large, mostly constructive, and frequently generous role in the world.

Under Donald Trump, however, U.S. foreign policy shows clear signs of significant departure. Support for alliances, embrace of free trade, concern over climate change, championing of democracy and human rights, American leadership *per se*—

these and other fundamentals of American foreign policy have been questioned and, more than once, rejected. Trump is the first post-World War II American president to view the burdens of world leadership as outweighing the benefits. As a result, the United States has changed from the principal preserver of order to a principal disrupter.

This change has major implications. It will make it far more difficult to deal with the challenges posed by globalization, including climate change and nuclear proliferation, to regulate cyberspace on terms compatible with American interests, or to help relieve the plight of refugees on terms consistent with American values. It will make it more difficult to build frameworks that promote trade and investment and to ensure that the United States benefits from them.

The process of pulling back began in the opening minutes of Donald Trump's presidency, in his inaugural address. The new president espoused a doctrine of "America First," suggesting that for decades what the United States had spent and done abroad had been to America's domestic detriment, and that the United States would no longer put the interests of others ahead of its own. The focus was on sovereign rights, not obligations, and on promoting national recovery rather than international order.

Not surprisingly, this message was not well received by American allies, who have made the strategic decision to place the lion's share of their security and well-being in American hands and were taken aback by the notion that their interests would be relegated to second place. It is important to keep in mind that alliances are important both for what they do—they pool resources on behalf of shared goals and defense—and what they discourage, including proliferation and deferring to adversaries.

Attempts by two of Mr. Trump's top aides to smooth matters did not succeed. Their statement—appearing in the form of a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed in late May—that "America First does not mean America alone" was inconsistent with their description of the world as a Hobbesian arena where nations, nongovernmental actors, and businesses engage and compete for advantage. This expression of pure

realism was at odds with the essence of alliances (best understood as strategic relationships) in which long-term commitments and shared interests take precedence over particular interactions or transactions and short-term considerations. Mr. Trump's own subsequent effort at the United Nations in September to portray America First as nothing different from the priority any leader would accord his country similarly failed to assuage concerns for the simple reason that the United States has a role in the world that is unlike that of any other country.

The inaugural address was also explicitly protectionist—including a call to “Buy American and Hire American.” Within days, Donald Trump translated these words into policy when he took the United States out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the 12-nation trade pact that had been painstakingly negotiated among governments representing some 40 percent of global GDP. While far from perfect—the TPP did not provide mechanisms for addressing currency manipulation or state subsidies or forced transfers of technology—it represented a major advance over existing trade pacts and would have increased American access to the markets of others, most of whom already enjoyed tariff-free access to the U.S. market. It also provided a foundation for future innovations that could promote and protect U.S. interests. Trade accords had been a staple of the post-World War II world, providing a mechanism for economic growth, development, and association with friends and allies, and a means of reining in would-be adversaries who otherwise would have little incentive to act with restraint. Walking away from the TPP was thus inconsistent with American economic and strategic interests alike. The decision also ignored the reality that it is not trade but innovation and productivity enhancements that account for the lion's share of recent job disappearance.

Over the ensuing months, the new president distanced himself further from many of the country's allies. He neglected to reiterate U.S. adherence to Article 5 of the NATO treaty (which underscores that an attack on one is an attack on all, triggered only once, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on the United States) when speaking in Europe in May; instead, the speech included several statements pressing the allies to spend and do more on defense. The overall effect was to make the U.S. commitment to Europe's security appear conditional. The president's subsequent

articulation (in Warsaw in July) of the U.S. commitment to Article 5 was a classic case of too little, too late. Moreover, public criticism by President Trump of South Korea, over both the terms of the bilateral trade pact and its alleged “appeasement” of North Korea, reinforced the notion that alliances and long-term relationships counted for little.

Just as significant was the decision announced in June that the United States intended to leave the Paris climate pact. This was an odd decision on the merits, as the agreement constituted a form of multilateralism that left all discretion with sovereign governments rather than with any supranational authority. The decision to leave raised questions (coming as it did on the heels of the decision to leave the TPP) about the continued willingness of the United States to play a role in upholding global order. Such questions increased in the wake of the December 2017 U.S. boycott of the Mexico City meeting convened to promote international cooperation on migration.

The net result was to give the United States a reputation for parochialism and unreliability, something inconsistent with its role as an ally and its hard-earned reputation for global leadership. It is strangely reminiscent of the dictum of the 19th-century British statesman Lord Palmerston: “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.” One could almost imagine Mr. Trump tweeting a version of the above.

Making matters worse were proposed budget cuts and unfilled posts at home and overseas that reduced the resources essential for an active diplomacy. It added up to what appeared to be a doctrine of withdrawal. Barack Obama, often reluctant to make large commitments, never could shed the oxymoronic description of his foreign policy as “Leading from Behind.” For Donald Trump, the tagline might well be “Leaving from Behind.”

U.S. standing in the world also suffered for other reasons. It was fine, as the president said in his speech to the United Nations in September, that the United States would not impose its way of life on others. But less clear is the country’s

continuing ability to “shine as an example for everyone to watch.” One of the most important mechanisms for influence is the example set by what goes on inside this country: politically, economically, and socially. But political dysfunction and pronounced division reduce the appeal of American democracy, while the government’s ability to advocate for democracy is further set back by President Trump’s attacks on courts and media. Social fissures, stagnating incomes, high inequality, increasing national debt (to be exacerbated by the tax cut) and violence likewise have taken their toll on respect for this country and what it stands for. Much the same can be said about a much-reduced U.S. willingness to accept refugees in general, and from certain predominantly Muslim countries in particular.

It is impossible to know whether what we have witnessed to date is something of an aberration or a new normal. In principle, Mr. Trump could evolve or, even if not, his successor could embrace a more familiar foreign policy. But it is also possible that Mr. Trump will be a two-term president and that his successor will embrace at least some of his approach to foreign policy. Regardless, the world that either a reformed President Trump or a successor would inherit is already one of increasing disarray. It is also far from assured that other governments would ever again see the United States the same way in that, if such a radical departure could happen once, it could happen a second time.

This raises a larger, related point. There must be a presumption of continuity in the foreign policy of a great power if allies are to remain allied and if foes are to be deterred. Unpredictability may on occasion make sense as a tactic, but not as a strategy. The many departures introduced or threatened by the Trump administration (most recently extending to both the NAFTA agreement and the 2015 nuclear accord with Iran) create doubts as to U.S. reliability. This is not meant as an argument for standing pat in foreign policy. The world is changing and U.S. foreign policy must change with it. The argument, though, is that the international project should be a renovation based on the existing order, not a teardown.

It needs pointing out that to recognize the revival of great-power rivalry, a prominent theme of the recently released National Security Strategy, provides little in the way of policy guidance. Countering Russian or Chinese challenges is necessary but not sufficient; doing so will not position the United States to meet regional and global challenges to its interests. What is required is the forging of effective collective responses, if need be without Russia and China, when possible with them.

The question naturally arises as to whether such a world could come about without the leadership of the United States, and in particular without the enthusiastic backing of the president and the executive branch. An optimist would argue that it could, that others in the United States and around the world would take up the slack. Alas, such optimism is mostly unwarranted.

It is true that Congress can do some things, such as introduce sanctions. It can also reject appointments, review treaties, hold hearings that shape public opinion, and withdraw or add funding. In addition, states and cities can do a good deal to offset executive disinterest in adopting policies to slow and adapt to climate change.

When all is said and done, though, the reality remains that in the American political system, most of the initiative when it comes to foreign policy lies with the executive. Critical positions (such as that of national security adviser) do not require confirmation, and the most important international agreements tend not to be in the form of treaties, in part to circumvent the need for Senate approval. Presidents have enormous latitude to use military force, to enter into and withdraw from negotiations and agreements, and to shape policy across the board, including the realms of both trade and immigration. It is difficult for Congress to restrain the executive—and even more difficult for it to compel the president to act or take the initiative when he holds back.

An optimist would also hope that other countries would pick up where the United States left off in promoting international order. The fact is, though, that there is no alternative great power willing and able to step in and assume what has been the U.S. role. China is often suggested, but its leadership is focused mostly on

consolidating domestic order and maintaining artificially high rates of economic growth, lest there be popular unrest. China's interest in regional and global institutions (including both its regional trade mechanism and its "One Belt, One Road" infrastructure initiative) seems more designed to bolster its economy and influence than to help set rules and arrangements that would be broadly beneficial. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea (including its rejection of an international legal ruling challenging its claims) and its unwillingness to do all it could to rein in North Korea casts further doubts as to its readiness to fill the shoes of the United States.

There is no other candidate. Russia under Vladimir Putin is a country with a narrowly based economy that is focused on retaining power at home, reestablishing Russian influence in the Middle East and Europe, and interfering in the internal politics of Western democracies. It is mostly a spoiler prepared to use those instruments of power it possesses (military, energy, and cyber) to advance its aims. India is preoccupied with the challenge of economic development and is tied down by its problematic relationship with Pakistan. Japan is held back by its declining population, domestic constraints, and the suspicions of its neighbors. Europe is limited in what it can do by a lack of defense capability, and is distracted by questions revolving around the relationship between member states and the EU. The cold truth is that the alternative to a U.S.-led international order is less international order.

All this comes at a time challenges to order are many, including a China that is trying to extend its writ over the South China Sea and a North Korea that appears intent on developing the ability to place nuclear warheads on ballistic missiles capable of reaching not just its neighbors but across the world and an Iran with an imperial vision of its position in the Middle East. The Middle East is a region of multiple conflicts of every sort—civil, regional, proxy, and global—involving state and nonstate actors, as well as a mixture of strong, weak, and failed states. There is as well the continuing Russian occupation of Crimea and its destabilization of eastern Ukraine, the undermining of democracy and economic deterioration of Venezuela, and any number of governance failures in Africa, most starkly in South

Sudan. There has been a marked deterioration in U.S. relations with Russia, the result not just of its military actions in Ukraine and Syria but also of its interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. And at the global level there is the continuing gap between challenges and collective responses, none more pronounced than in the domain of cyberspace.

True, it is important not to overlook those positive developments and trends that do exist. The world economy is growing at 4 percent. Oil and gas are likely to remain relatively inexpensive. ISIS is losing its territorial hold in the Middle East. Europe appears to have stemmed the tide of populism. The new French president is tackling much-needed domestic reform while, together with the chancellor of Germany, pushing for much-needed reform of the EU. Brexit seems more an exception than a trend within Europe, with the U.K. rather than Europe the principal loser. India is growing at a robust pace, while a good many countries in Latin America and Africa are examples of what improved governance can bring about. But these positives do not offset the larger and more numerous negatives.

The net result is a world of growing disarray. This trend is partly the result of what might be called structural factors—the rise of China, globalization, the emergence of a large number of entities (state and nonstate alike) with meaningful capacity and often dangerous intentions, and the failure of regional and international institutions (many created in the aftermath of World War II) to adjust sufficiently to new distributions of power and new challenges. In many cases, the gap between the challenge and the ability of the world to come together to manage or regulate it is not just large but growing. Rising disarray is, as well, the result of several poor policy choices made by the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama—and, increasingly, Donald Trump.

The good news is that the costs of promoting global order tend to be less than the costs of not; the bad news is that this truth does not seem to be recognized by many Americans, including the 45th president. Abdication is as unwarranted as it is unwise. It is a basic fact of living in a global world that no country can insulate itself from much of what happens elsewhere. A foreign policy based on sovereignty alone

will not provide security in a global, interconnected world. Or, to paraphrase the jargon of the day, America cannot be great at home in a world of disarray.

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*This piece is adapted from the afterword to the paperback edition of "A World in Disarray."*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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