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America's abdication of global leadership and the future of world order

American global leadership is in turmoil, and Europe and the rest of the world must face this present reality. Would a "G9" have the will to step in and provide enough leadership to save the rules-based world order?

For more than seventy years American global leadership has been the defining feature of international politics. The United States emerged from the Second World War as the most powerful nation in the world, and it used that power to forge an international order based on collective security, open markets, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. That international order – a Pax Americana – produced decades of great power peace and cooperation, extraordinary prosperity for a growing population around the world, and more freedom for more people than at any time in history.

Yet, the continued success of this American-led world order is now in question. Rising rival powers are challenging America's dominance and influence in continuing to lead the world. A growing domestic backlash to the costs of economic globalization is undermining support for democratic institutions and bolstering those in Western countries who favor more autocratic rule. Above all, America itself has abdicated its long-standing and crucial global leadership role, preferring instead to use its still formidable economic and military power to secure short-term wins over others.

Aside from America, few have benefited more from America's global leadership than the countries of Europe. Devastated by two world wars that left tens of millions dead and entire nations destroyed, Europe remade itself – thanks in good part to American assistance. The Marshall Plan provided much-needed aid to begin rebuilding the continent and helped promote economic and political cooperation among the nations of Europe. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the continued, large-scale deployment of U.S. troops in Europe, provided the security umbrella under which Europe could focus on rebuilding and renewal.

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Europe succeeded spectacularly. Its economies grew rapidly and collectively rival America's in size and importance. Political cooperation replaced centuries of war as the means to settle disputes among nations. After the Cold War, the European Union integrated the long-subjugated countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including a newly united Germany, into a prosperous, open, and democratic community. By the turn of the century, a continent twice destroyed by war during the twentieth century had turned into a Europe that was whole, free, and at peace. That success was perhaps the single greatest achievement of American leadership since World War II.

Yet, today, America's leadership is disappearing, and the international institutions, rules, and overall order that were created and sustained by that leadership are faltering as a result. Unlike his predecessors since Harry Truman sat in the Oval Office, Donald Trump came to Washington

believing that the challenges America faced at home could not be solved by American leadership abroad. To the contrary; he blamed that leadership for all that ailed America. He saw America's long-standing alliances as a drain on much-needed resources for which America received nothing in return. He viewed America's trade policies as the cause of its economic decline, as jobs moved overseas and trade deficits mounted. Rather than looking to cooperate with other countries to address these ills, Trump promised to make America great by competing with everyone and winning again.

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Trump has sought to return to a world where competition and dominance replace cooperation and leadership as the primary mode of global engagement. In the process, he has weakened the collective security alliances that have been the basis of American military engagement abroad and undermined the global trading system by imposing tariffs arbitrarily and ignoring long-established rules for settling disputes. And he has challenged democratic norms at home while embracing strongmen abroad, thus weakening the bonds among democracies and defenders of human rights that have been a defining characteristic of America's global engagement for decades.

America's abdication of global leadership has come as a shock to its allies and friends. While many have had major differences with Washington about specific policies and priorities pursued by some of Trump's predecessors, they have never before been confronted by a wholesale American assault on the institutions, rules, and norms that have defined their interaction with Washington for 75 years. For a time, America's allies and friends hoped that this abdication was temporary, that Trump's advisors would put America back on course. But those advisors are gone, having resigned in disgust or been fired by a presidential tweet.

By 2018, it was clear that Trump would pursue his America First policies with abandon. He blew up the G7 meeting in Quebec, and nearly did the same at the NATO Summit meeting that followed. He unilaterally abandoned international agreements on climate change, the Iran nuclear deal, trans-Pacific trade, and a host of arms control agreements, including a Reagan-era treaty eliminating a whole class of U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons that had helped end the Cold War. He imposed tariffs on friends and foes alike, sought to negotiate new deals bilaterally, and threatened to upend the global trading system that has served so many for so long. In these and other ways, Trump charted his own course. And it is highly unlikely that anyone can or will convince him to change direction.

What are America's allies to do? So far, they have reacted with incredulity and denial. Most have turned inward, hoping that the storm will soon pass. Some have begun to hedge, moving closer together and also to America's rivals Russia and China in the hope they will not be crushed in a renewed global competition. These measures are understandable, but they will not work. If the world truly turns competitive, pitting great powers against each other, the interests and perspectives of smaller nations will inevitably be sacrificed at the whims of the bigger and stronger powers.

There is, however, an alternative – which is to use the power America's major allies have to collectively uphold the rules-based world order while America sorts itself out.¹ The nine major U.S. allies – France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the EU in Europe; Australia, Japan, and South Korea in Asia; and Canada in North America – can together supply the leadership that Trump has abandoned. This “G9” constitutes the largest economic power in the world, and the combined militaries are stronger than all but America's. They have already begun to strengthen the trading order by negotiating new agreements among themselves. They will also need to bolster defense spending and use their militaries and large foreign aid budgets to defend and promote international cooperation, including on democracy and human rights. The question is not one of power or capability, but rather one of having the will to act.

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If these nine do take on the challenge, they will not only slow the erosion of a world order but set the stage for the return of the kind of American leadership they need and that the survival of the order demands. Indeed, the long-term effectiveness of that order demands a greater sharing of the burdens and responsibilities of global leadership than has been the case up until now. By stepping up and doing more, America's major allies will not only help themselves but also lay the basis for a more sustainable and lasting cooperation with the United States, if and when Washington again decides to take up the mantle of global leadership.

¹ The following draws on Daalder and Lindsay, “The Committee to Save the World Order,” Foreign Affairs (Nov/Dec 2018).