

"America's Changing Leadership Role in the World"

Despite the growing attention brought to America's world leadership role precipitated by the Donald Trump presidency, there is no common conception of what we mean when we refer to global leadership. Specifically, there is no common understanding of 'global leadership.' Without a clear and commonly accepted definition, preparing an unbiased and useful Research Paper for the Current Issues Club has been difficult. The concept of a World Leader in terms of a specific country is illusory; there may be no such thing. For purposes of our discussion, I rely on the general conclusion that America has been a world leader since World War II.

American leadership abroad has in some ways been the invisible hand of global order: preventing the outbreak of great power wars through the upkeep of alliances, institutions, and constant diplomacy. It has been America's ability to impress all nations that interdependence and coexistence should be respected and ensured. Take the Marshall Plan. That may have been America's finest hour. America's generosity, spirit of cooperation, and vision for a strongly interconnected world led the world to prosperity and peace.

Michael Mandelbaum, a political analyst at The Johns Hopkins University, writes ([A Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World's Government in the 21st Century](#)), that in the wake of the Cold War, the United States has played an important role in maintaining world order. "It offers reassurance. That is, its military presence suppresses suspicions in Europe and Asia that may otherwise be felt and could lead to unhappy political outcomes. The United States leads the effort to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons to dangerous regimes or groups. During the Cold War, it was America who founded NATO, to guarantee our collective security. It was you who pushed for the United Nations, to champion the cause of global peace. You created the World Bank, the World Health Organization, and so much more that we value."

According to professor Mandelbaum, the United States also provides these services to the international economy. "It provides a secure framework for international transactions where the United States provides the most frequently used currency—the dollar—where the United States has acted as the so-called 'lender of last resort,' acting through the International Monetary Fund even as central banks do within countries, and where the United States has also been the consumer of last resort, keeping the global economy running through the ravenous and economically constructive appetites of American consumers." Professor Mandelbaum notes that the United States also provides humanitarian aid and monitors the status of human rights worldwide. Overall, Mandelbaum concludes, America's international role has been beneficial because it provides public goods without controlling the politics and economics of other societies.

However, Professor Benjamin Barber says U.S.-led regime changes in Iraq and Afghanistan are examples of America imposing its will on other countries. He adds that U.S. foreign aid often is granted on the condition that recipient countries adopt America's economic model even if it may not fit. But U.S. activities in the rest of the world are not cheap. According to the Congressional Research Service, for example, the U.S. cost of war and reconstruction in Iraq is approaching 200 billion dollars. The United States gave more than 16 billion dollars in aid to developing countries in 2003, almost twice as much as the next biggest donor, Japan. So the question for many observers is whether America can afford a continued leadership role in world affairs.

Many analysts agree that the most serious threat to U.S. global leadership may develop at home, not abroad—namely the economy. Meanwhile, rising powers such as China and the European Union are striving for greater international influence. But so far none has the economic power, the political will or the military strength to assume leadership in the world community. So if the

United States were to decrease its role in international affairs most analysts warn that the world could become a more dangerous and less prosperous place. There were some bad choices—like Vietnam and America unfortunately supported some ugly people—Pinochet in Chile, Papa Doc in Haiti, Suharto in Indonesia to name a few.

We now have a new president who brings different set of ideas to the table:

1. America invented global trade, but Trump believes in renegotiating trade agreements
2. The western alliance was built around NATO, but Trump argues that it may be “obsolete.”
3. The free world has always stood shoulder to shoulder against the Russians, but Trump argues for more cooperation with Putin.

The big message of 2016 is that large numbers of American voters, Democrat and Republican, do not buy what their political leaders have been selling for so long, and that includes foreign policy. The evidence of this from Trump’s victory is reinforced by Senator Bernie Sanders’ remarkable showing in the Democratic primaries. Perhaps the electorate no longer accepts the American role in the world that policymakers have long taken for granted. Maybe foreign policy assumptions of the past few decades need to be overhauled. The record, after all, is not very impressive. In this century, America has not achieved most of the key national security objectives it has set for itself.

Here is a list, in no particular order, of some key goals both the Bush and Obama administrations set for themselves in foreign policy: Prevent North Korea getting nuclear weapons; prevent Iran getting nuclear weapons and contain its growing influence in the Middle East; transform Iraq and Afghanistan into stable, progressive, pro-Western states, or at least leave them as minimally functioning countries; contain and eventually crush jihadist extremism; harness the Arab Spring to enhance U.S. influence in the Arab world; reconcile Russia to the U.S.-led order and resist its efforts to rebuild a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe; resist China’s challenge to the U.S.-led order in Asia; broker a durable settlement between Israel and the Palestinians; and prevent another 9/11 on U.S. soil. Of all these, the only clear success is the avoidance of another major attack on America itself. The Iran nuclear deal may prove a partial success, but even there the best hope may be that Iranian nuclear capability has been deferred. All the rest have been failures.

Trump may not be bound to fail where his predecessors have succeeded. Given the rise of other countries with enough power to shrug off U.S. pressure—and other factors, like the ability of smaller powers to punch above their weight in cyberspace—this moment was inevitable. America will remain the sole superpower for the foreseeable future—the U.S. is the only country that can project military muscle, economic clout and cultural influence into every region of the world. But Trump's election marks a potential break with the past, one with global implications. Trump's "America first" approach fundamentally changes the U.S. role in the world. Trump agrees with leaders of both political parties that the U.S. is an exceptional nation, but he insists that the country can't remain exceptional if it keeps stumbling down the path that former Presidents, including Republicans and Democrats, have followed since the end of World War II. For at least the next four years, America's interactions with other nations will be guided not by the conviction that U.S. leadership is good for America and the world but by Trump's transactional approach. This will force friends and foes alike to question every assumption they've made about what Washington will and will not do. Add a more assertive EU, China and Russia and the greater willingness of traditional U.S. allies to hedge their bets on American plans and it's clear that we've reached a turning point. Trump is not an isolationist, but he's certainly a unilateralist.