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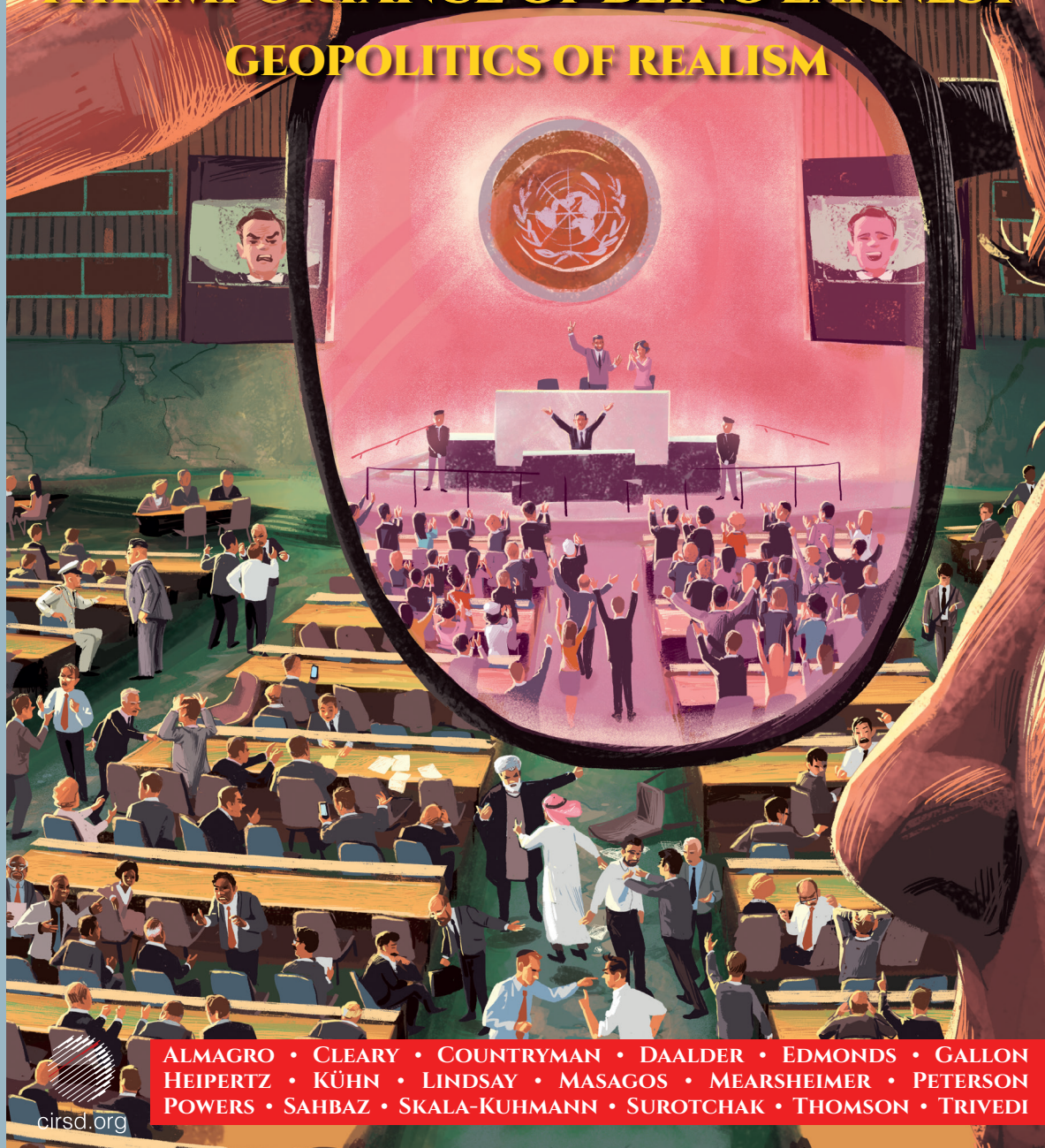
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WAGING WAR ON THE WORLD

TRUMP'S WINNER-TAKE-ALL WORLDVIEW

Ivo Daalder and James M. Lindsay

ROOM 2E924 in the outermost ring of the Pentagon was packed. Better known as “the Tank,” it is one of America’s most secure facilities and the meeting place for the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. On the morning of July 20th, 2017, though, it hosted a special guest: President Donald J. Trump. Gathered with him in the small, windowless room was virtually everyone who was anyone dealing with foreign and national security policy: the vice president, cabinet secretaries, assorted White House advisers, and the chair and vice chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

They were there to provide Trump with a crash course on American global leadership based on a judgment shared by Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that, six months into his presidency,

Trump still had much to learn about the world and America’s role in it.

On the campaign trail, he repeatedly showed his ignorance regarding basic foreign policy issues, even as he castigated past administrations, Democratic and Republican alike, for what he called their catastrophic choices. Reaching the Oval Office had not miraculously given Trump a deeper grasp of global politics or a greater appreciation for the “lousy” deals and “stupid” commitments his predecessors had made. Instead, he resisted inconvenient facts, repeated urban legends, and contested the counsel offered by his advisers. Perhaps a tutorial in the Tank on how and why the United States had pursued an out-sized role around the world since World War II might persuade him that it was worth continuing to do so.

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President Trump chairs a July 2017 meeting in the Joint Chiefs of Staffs' conference room in the Pentagon, widely known as 'the Tank'

Mattis set the context for the meeting at the start. “The greatest thing the ‘greatest generation’ left us,” the retired Marine four-star general said to open the briefing, “was the rules-based postwar international order.” The briefers then took Trump on a tour around the globe. Using maps, charts, and photos, they laid out America’s far-flung overseas commitments. They reviewed alliances and trade deals, carefully explaining what challenges and opportunities the United States faced beyond its borders. And they stressed how America’s global leadership benefited U.S. businesses and created jobs for Americans.

But Trump was not impressed. “This is exactly what I don’t want,” he objected, peppering them with questions: Why were U.S. troops in South Korea? Why didn’t America’s free-trade agreements generate surpluses for the United States? Why didn’t Europe pay its fair share for NATO? Why shouldn’t the United States build up its nuclear stockpile?

Some of the exchanges grew testy, as the experts tried to persuade a president who thought he knew more than he did to adopt a worldview utterly foreign to his thinking. At several points Trump rebuked his briefers with a simple and direct rebuttal: “I don’t agree!”

The July 20th meeting later gained fame for Tillerson's expletive-filled assessment of Trump after the president left the Tank to return to the White House, which we will not repeat here. But the more consequential assessment, even though it drew almost no attention, was the one Trump made in the Tank as the meeting ended: according to him, the rules-based world order that so captivated his briefers was "not working at all." The overriding question for America and the rest of the world was, would Trump try to fix it, or walk away from it?

INHERITED CHALLENGES

"I inherited a mess," Trump complained repeatedly after becoming president. The specific challenges he faced were easy to list: North Korea was gaining the capability to hit the United States with nuclear-armed missiles; a revanchist Russia was challenging American interests in the Middle East, sowing divisions in Europe, and interfering in the domestic politics of the United States; a rising China was looking to dominate Asia and rewrite the rules of global politics in its favor; an aggressive Iran was seeking regional hegemony in the Middle East; the Islamic State controlled parts of Iraq and Syria, inspiring jihadists around the globe... The list went on.

Underlying these problems, however, was a broader, more fundamental one: the world that the United States created in the aftermath of World War II—one that would be more conducive to U.S. interests and values, and to countries that shared them—that Mattis and his colleagues explained to Trump in the Tank that July day, was fracturing. That world had been built on advancing collective security; opening free markets; and promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

It had been a radically novel strategy forged on the ashes of World War II: the creation of a system based on the logic of cooperation rather than competition—countries willing to follow America's lead would flourish, and as they did, so too would the United States. Admittedly, the rules-based order never fully matched its founders' aspirations. Its reach was limited to the West throughout the Cold War. The United States at times failed to live up to its lofty rhetoric, as narrow interests trumped broader ones in its foreign policy choices. Human rights were often sacrificed to political expediency. And global leadership did not guarantee good judgment, as the Bay of Pigs and the Vietnam War attested.

Yet even taking these failures into account, the American decision to

lead the Free World after World War II was an historic success. Europe and Japan were rebuilt. The reach of democracy and human rights was extended. Most important, American leadership helped facilitate one of history's great geopolitical triumphs: the peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union. That, in turn, created the opportunity to extend the benefits of the American-led order well beyond the West. Washington believed it had discovered "the secret sauce" of national success, and was eager to share it. Just as important, other capitals were eager to embrace Washington's guidance. Democracy was on the march. Global trade boomed. Hundreds of millions were lifted out of abject poverty. It seemed momentarily that the world had reached the "end of history."

But history did not end. Even as the ambitions for what the foreign policy of the United States could achieve grew in the post-Cold War era, and Americans became comfortable thinking of themselves as the "indispensable nation," the world they had created was unraveling. Two decades after the end of the Cold War, the optimism of a Pax Americana had given way, as Richard Haass aptly put it, to "a world in disarray."

Barack Obama ended his presidency knowing that this disarray had continued, yet still convinced that the essential frame of America's postwar global engagement was right. "American leadership in this world really is indispensable," he wrote in a letter he left behind for his successor on the Resolute desk in the Oval Office. "It's up to us, through action and example, to sustain the international order that's expanded steadily since the end of the Cold War, and upon which our own wealth and safety depend." It was heartfelt advice from the outgoing president. It was not advice that Donald Trump would take.

Donald Trump recognized many of the problems bedeviling America's role in the world. He had campaigned on promising to solve them. But unlike all of his predecessors since Truman, Trump didn't see global leadership as the solution to what ailed America. On the contrary, he saw it as the problem. America's alliance commitments had, in his view, required the United States to "pay billions—hundreds of billions of dollars to support other countries that are in theory wealthier than we are." Trump was not interested in securing the cooperation of other countries. He wanted to take back what they had taken from America.

Two decades after the end of the Cold War, the optimism of a Pax Americana had given way, as Richard Haass aptly put it, to "a world in disarray."

Trump's disdain for American foreign policy had deep roots. From the instant he first burst into the public eye in the 1980s, he championed a return to the older logic of competition and domination. He argued that the United States should use its preponderant power to dictate to others. Cooperation and multilateralism were fool's errands. America's friends and allies were not looking to cooperate, but to get a free ride on its security guarantees and to pick its pockets on trade deals.

What Trump was offering was a return to a foreign policy based on the logic of competition and domination, he continually spoke of winning—and he intended to win.

He placed these criticisms at the core of his campaign. Trump vowed that “we will no longer surrender this country or its people to the false song of globalism.” None of the three pillars of American foreign policy—security alliances; open trade; and support for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law—escaped his scorn. He said he would happily tell the other members of NATO, the most successful military alliance in history, “Congratulations, you will be defending yourself.” He suggested that Japan and South Korea acquire their own nuclear weapons. He denounced U.S. trade policy, vowing to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement

(NAFTA), and impose huge tariffs on China. He decried Washington's efforts to lecture other capitals on democracy and human rights, because “we have to fix our own mess.”

What Trump was offering was a return to a foreign policy based on the logic of competition and domination. His predecessors spoke of American leadership routinely—and glowingly. He seldom mentioned it at all; instead, he continually spoke of winning—and he intended to win.

Foreign policy experts surveyed the world and saw friends and enemies, allies and adversaries. When Trump surveyed the world, he saw only competitors, and they were seeking to take advantage of him and the United States. He would judge them not on sentimentalities about the past, but on their willingness to make deals that he liked. His comment about world leaders just days before he took the oath of office made the point. “So, I give everybody an even start,” he said. “Right now, as far as I'm concerned, everybody's got an even start.” No other American president would have equated the leaders of Britain and Australia with those of China and Russia.

The disdain Trump showed for American leadership on the campaign trail alarmed foreign policy experts in both major political parties. They breathed a collective sigh of relief, however, when he started his presidency by appointing foreign policy traditionalists like Mattis, Tillerson, and Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster to critical national security positions.

This “axis of adults” in one telling, or “globalists” in another, would, or so the thinking went, curtail Trump's excesses and steer him toward a more conventional path.

The praise for these appointments was not rooted in a belief that these picks had quick and easy solutions for a world in disarray. They did not. Rather, the appointments were cheered because they, and the subordinates they hired, believed in the importance of American leadership—and what it could accomplish. This “axis of adults” in one telling, or “globalists” in another, would, or so the thinking went, curtail Trump's excesses and steer him toward a more conventional path.

That hope rested on two questionable premises: that presidents change their views easily; and that advisers matter more than the person they are advising. Trump quickly disproved both premises. He had said what he meant and meant what he said on the campaign trail. And no amount

of expert advice was going to change things. He ended American participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), withdrew from the Paris climate accords, initially refused to endorse America's alliance commitments, withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, renegotiated NAFTA, imposed tariffs on trade with friends and foes alike, recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and curried favor with Russia even as his advisers

argued, sometimes publicly, that he was undermining America's national interests and global leadership.

Just as dangerous as what Trump did was how he went about doing it. He insulted allies and flattered adversaries. He routinely surprised his foreign policy team with his tweets and public statements, leaving them to clean up the diplomatic messes he created. The president “has moved a lot of us out of our comfort zone,” as McMaster delicately put it. Trump, as he had said on the campaign trail, was more direct: “I alone can fix it.”

EMPTY THRONE

Trump's first two years in office sent an unmistakable message. He had no interest in leading America's friends and allies. He was looking

to beat them. His was not a win-win world, but a world of winners and losers. “You hear lots of people say that a great deal is when both sides win,” he once wrote. “That is a bunch of crap. In a great deal you win—not the other side. You crush the opponent and come away with something better for yourself.”

Trump was comfortable abdicating American leadership, because he saw no value in it—just costs. In his view,

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America neither had exceptional responsibilities nor was an exceptional country. Rather, it was like every other nation and, as a result, should pursue its own narrow interests, not mutual ones. “I will always put America first,” he told world leaders gathered at the United Nations in September 2017, “just like you, as the leaders of your countries will always, and should always, put your countries first.”

Trump’s retreat from global leadership was not lost on America’s enemies—or its friends. A senior Japanese foreign policy official, assessing Trump’s policy in late 2017, said with sadness: “the throne is empty.” Long accustomed to looking to Washington for direction, Berlin, London, Paris, Seoul, Tokyo, and other capitals now found that Trump had no interest in leading the Free World.

Donald Trump has wagered that the United States can secure the benefits of the world it created without bearing the burdens of leading it. That bet is unlikely to pay off. The world that America created after World War II was not inevitable. It was the result

of conscious policy choices made in the pursuit of a vision of how cooperation and leadership, rather than domination and competition, could benefit the United States.

By choosing to act alone rather than mobilizing others in common cause, Trump was waging war on the world America had made. He was also committing the very mistake he had accused his predecessors of making: taking on burdens that others could have shared and squandering American power in the process.

WINNING LIKE NEVER BEFORE

Donald Trump was pleased as Air Force One climbed into the sky over Helsinki on July 16th, 2018. He had just concluded what he saw as a successful six-day trip to Europe. His final meeting was a two-hour one-on-one with Russian President Vladimir Putin, which he believed had put U.S.-Russia relations on a positive footing thanks to “a direct, open, deeply productive dialogue.”

The Helsinki meeting had come just days after a NATO summit in Brussels, which left Trump thinking his tough talk had compelled other NATO members to spend more on defense. In between Brussels and Helsinki, he

had traveled to Britain, where he was the first president to be hosted for a state dinner at Blenheim Palace, the birthplace of Winston Churchill. Trump felt satisfied that his busy week had delivered on the promise he had made in his inaugural address that “America will start winning again, winning like never before.”

By the time Air Force One landed back in the United States, however, it was clear that Trump was nearly alone in thinking his trip had been a big win. While he was in the air, Republicans had joined with Democrats in criticizing his press conference in Helsinki, where he stood next to Putin and seemingly accepted the Russian leader’s denial that Moscow had interfered in the 2016 American presidential election.

The controversy over the Helsinki press conference overshadowed the turmoil Trump had caused at his previous stops. He had kicked off the NATO summit by attacking German

Chancellor Angela Merkel, whom he accused of being “totally controlled” by and “captive” to Russia, because Germany was building a pipeline to import Russian natural gas. He then threw the second day of meetings into

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uproar by demanding an emergency session so he could press NATO members to spend more on defense. If they declined to increase defense spending, Trump warned, he would “do his own thing,” which other leaders took as a threat to leave NATO. Although Trump later

claimed he forced NATO members “to substantially up their commitment [to] levels that they’ve never thought of before,” the allies merely reaffirmed their pledge, first made in 2014, to spend two percent of their GDP on defense by 2024.

Trump’s bull-in-a-china-shop ways continued when he reached Britain, where he avoided London because large numbers of demonstrators had gathered to protest his visit. As his dinner with British Prime Minister Theresa May at Blenheim Palace was concluding, a London newspaper released an interview in which he criticized her for ignoring his advice on how to negotiate Britain’s exit from the European Union. In the interview, he also suggested that Boris Johnson, who days earlier had

resigned from May's cabinet over of her handling of Brexit, would make "a great Prime Minister." Trump ended his weekend stay in Britain by calling the EU "a foe" because of the way it treated the U.S. on trade. He tellingly added that "Russia is a foe in certain respects." Trump amended that assessment in Helsinki, saying that Putin was a "good competitor," and that he viewed the word "competitor" as "a compliment."

Faced with a barrage of criticism, Trump did what he hated to do:

he walked back his Helsinki remarks on Russia and the election. He insisted that the controversy had been triggered by a slip of the tongue on his part, adding, "I accept our intelligence community's conclusion that Russia's meddling in the 2016 election took place." But he immediately began retracting his concession, noting that "other people also" could have interfered. And he declined to temper his criticisms of the EU or NATO, even after the release of an interview, conducted in Helsinki but not aired until he returned to Washington, in which he again threw into doubt his commitment to defending America's allies. When asked why Americans should be prepared to defend a NATO

member like Montenegro, Trump responded, "I understand what you're saying. I've asked the same question."

He went on to complain that Montenegro, a small Balkan country of some six hundred thousand inhabitants that had more troops per capita in Afghanistan than the United States, was "very aggressive" and might cause World War III.

SAFER AND MORE PROSPEROUS?

The outcry that followed Trump's return from Europe in July 2018 was in a way

surprising. What he said in Brussels, Britain, and Helsinki he had said many times before. And that was the trip's real lesson. The 2016 presidential campaign had generated talk that reporters took Trump literally, but not seriously, while voters took him seriously, but not literally. The European trip showed that, on foreign policy, he should be taken both literally and seriously. In short, Trump was not looking to lead. He was looking to win.

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their campaign promises. They are judged on whether their choices make Americans safer and more prosperous. Two years into his presidency, Trump had surprisingly few "wins" to show for his disruptive decisions.

He had tightened controls on illegal immigration and had all but stopped the admission of refugees. But the much-ballyhooed wall with Mexico remained unbuilt,

Mexico still refused to pay for it, and the number of migrants illegally crossing the southern border surged in 2018, after falling sharply following his inauguration. The missile strikes he had ordered against Syria in April 2017 failed to deter Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad from using chemical weapons again in 2018. American air power and special forces helped Iraqi and other local forces dislodge the Islamic State from Iraq and much of Syria. But Trump had no diplomatic strategy for securing the peace, and his December 2018 decision to withdraw all U.S. troops from Syria, which was subsequently abandoned, undermined any long-term effort to stabilize the country.

Despite his praise for Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, Arab nations ignored his call to deploy

their own troops to Syria, and to spend massively on reconstructing the war-torn country. Trump reversed course on his campaign pledge to withdraw from Afghanistan and said that the United States would "fight to win." But the security situation continued to

deteriorate during 2018, and the White House began exploring a diplomatic course to end the war instead.

In 2018, Trump made big rolls of the dice on

North Korea and Iran. It would take months, if not years, to get a final accounting on each. The Singapore Summit with Kim Jong-un may have jump-started a negotiating process, but as the failure of the Hanoi Summit months later underscored, a willingness to talk hardly guaranteed that the two sides would make quick progress, or even that they had agreed on the specific goal the talks were designed to achieve.

In withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal, Trump gambled that he could either break the mullahs' hold on power or force them to negotiate on his terms. But without the broad international support Obama had secured previously, the unilateral re-imposition of sanctions set the stage for a crisis in transatlantic relations, and fueled a potential military confrontation with Tehran.

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Things looked much the same on trade policy. Trump won, at best, modest adjustments in the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement. And he side-lined, at least temporarily, a budding trade war he had started with the EU by agreeing to begin new talks on reducing trade barriers on most industrial goods.

Beyond that, his tough line with America's trading partners yielded few results, other than to jeopardize American exports and cost American consumers. He insisted that "trade wars are good, and easy to win," but China rebuffed his demands for trade concessions. His tariffs on imports of steel and aluminum triggered retaliation from trading partners and inflicted a heavy cost on steel- and aluminum-using industries in the United States. A modest renegotiation of NAFTA faces an uphill ratification on Capitol Hill, especially in the wake of Trump's threats to impose new tariffs on Mexico over immigration flows. Japan, Australia, and the other nine signatories to TPP ignored his efforts to torpedo the deal and instead negotiated a revised agreement that left the United States on the outside looking in.

Country after country rebuffed his demands to negotiate bilateral deals. Instead, major trading partners, such as

Canada, Europe, Japan, and Mexico, opted to bypass Washington, seeking to make themselves less reliant on the American market by negotiating new deals among themselves and with other countries.

Trump's shortage of wins partly reflected his own shortcomings as president: his ignorance on many issues, unwillingness to take advice from others, impulsiveness, and lack of strategic thinking.

FROM INDISPENSABLE TO UNPREDICTABLE

Trump's shortage of wins partly reflected his own shortcomings as president: his ignorance on many issues, unwillingness to take advice from others, impulsiveness, and lack

of strategic thinking. He had insisted during the campaign that he knew the issues better than the experts, and that, even if he did not, he would master them quickly and easily. Once he was in office, neither turned out to be true.

All presidents know less than they need to about the policy challenges they face. That is why it is critical they appoint a team of seasoned advisers and create a process that enables them to work through complicated issues. Trump had promised on the campaign trail that he would pick the "best people." And he did pick many eminently qualified people to staff his cabinet.

But in office Trump repeatedly ignored their advice or did not even

bother to solicit it. He made the critical decisions to meet with North Korea's Kim Jung-un and to reject a European proposal to toughen sanctions on Iran without convening his national security team to evaluate the pros and cons. He frequently announced his decisions on important policy matters through tweets that came as much as a surprise to his advisers as they did to everyone else. Trump himself made clear how little stock he put in advice and advisers when he dismissed concerns about his failure to fully staff the State Department by declaring, "I'm the only one that matters."

Trump compounded the chaotic nature of his administration's decisionmaking with his impulsiveness. He frequently trumpeted the virtue of being unpredictable, arguing that unpredictability can put adversaries on their back foot and potentially create new diplomatic openings.

Kim Jong-un's decision to open up a diplomatic path, rather than continuing to escalate the confrontation with the United States and others, may have been a case in point. But like cayenne pepper, unpredictability is not suited to all occasions and is best used judiciously when it is. Friends, allies, and trading partners in particular, need

and prefer dependability and predictability, not surprises.

Trump, however, careened so frequently from position to position that it appeared he had no coherent alternative in mind. He repeatedly praised China, then challenged it, and then

Trump's answer to "What next?" was usually "We'll see what happens."

discarded the challenge. He hailed the potential for U.S.-Russian cooperation while his own National Security Strategy called Rus-

sia a rival power "attempting to erode American security and prosperity." He offered to negotiate a trade deal with the European Union, then called it a "foe" and imposed tariffs, then committed to pursue talks to build "strong trade relations in which both of us will win." He denounced TPP, suggested the United States might rejoin it, and then denounced it again.

Friends and foes alike suffered whiplash trying to determine precisely what he wanted. "The indispensable power," complained one European ambassador in Washington, "has become the unpredictable power."

INCOHERENCE

Trump's inflated sense of his own knowledge, his reluctance to solicit and take advice, and his tendency to pursue disruption for disruption's sake fueled his administration's inability to generate

and execute a sustainable foreign policy strategy. In violation of the old military adage—and common sense—to avoid waging wars on two fronts, he picked fights on multiple issues with multiple countries at the same time.

He wanted China's help in pressing North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons and Iran to accept more restrictions on its behavior, while at the same time demanding major changes in China's trade and economic policy. It was hardly a surprise that Beijing balked. He needed U.S. allies in Asia, Europe, and North America to contain Iran, constrain

North Korea, and counter China and Russia. But instead of leading them in a common cause, he targeted them with trade sanctions, insulted them in tweets and interviews, and ignored their pleas for common action.

Most important, winning strategies answer the critical question: What next? Trump seldom had a ready answer on that score. When he pulled the United States out of TPP, he didn't have an alternative for forging better trade rules for the Asia-Pacific region or blunting growing Chinese power—even though his

own administration viewed Beijing as America's main strategic competitor.

He walked away from the Paris climate accords promising to negotiate a better deal, but offered neither ideas for

how to mitigate climate change nor a strategy for getting all the other countries that were sticking with Paris on board. He ordered the American embassy in Israel be moved to Jerusalem without devising a diplomatic plan to address Palestinian anger or keep the peace process from being derailed. He withdrew the United States from the Iran agreement, but outlined

no strategy for getting a better deal or for preventing Iran from restarting its nuclear weapons program.

Trump's answer to "What next?" was usually "We'll see what happens." It was a disquieting response. And it showed that the man who had written *The Art of the Deal* (1987) was a better deal-breaker than deal-maker.

ABDICATION OF GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

The bigger problem with Trump's foreign policy was his abdication of American global leadership. He saw

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little value in friends and allies, and showed no interest in leading them. They were instead foes to be bullied into complying with his demands. His hostility to America's traditional leadership role was clear to those who had long been accustomed to being led. "The fact that our friend and ally has come to question the very worth of its mantle of global leadership puts in sharper focus the need for the rest of us to set our own clear and sovereign course," said Chrystia Freeland, Canada's foreign minister, five months into Trump's presidency. "To say this is not controversial: It is a fact."

To be sure, American allies had complained about Washington's flagging leadership before. But then their remonstrations were about America's failure on specific issues: they were not fears that the United States was turning its back on its friends and allies more broadly. In decades past, allies weren't attacking the idea of American leadership itself. Trump's approach to foreign policy felt—and was—different.

Trump's supporters insisted the allies had it all wrong, that he was leading. But true leadership is

not so much about who is behind the wheel as how many others come along for the ride. And Trump's greatest flaw was that he not only failed to persuade others to follow his chosen course, but in many instances even failed to try.

Far more than Trump realized, America's friends and allies had choices about their future, including the choice to work without, or around, the United States. If he wanted to be transactional, they could be as well.

When he announced that he was withdrawing the United States from the Paris climate agreement, no other country joined him in exiting. "Whatever leadership is," a senior French diplomat said at the G-20 meeting that reaffirmed support for the climate agreement, "it is not being outvoted, 19 to 1." The same

dynamic repeated itself with his decisions to leave TPP, to move the American embassy to Jerusalem, to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal, to take America out of UNESCO, and to walk away from global negotiations on a UN Compact on Migration. Trump went one way. America's friends and allies went another.

Trump and his advisers dismissed the complaints from America's friends. "What's good for the U.S. is what's good for the rest of the world," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin argued. But few of America's allies agreed.

Aside from a few friends, like Israel and Saudi Arabia, who applauded Trump's choices because he gave them what they wanted and asked for nothing in return, most allies saw his decisions as straining and potentially rupturing their ties with the United States. Mexicans elected a president hostile to America. Canadians openly discussed how to diversify their foreign policy portfolio so they could rely less on the United States. The Japanese worried that the United States would soon abandon them. Australians wondered what an inward looking and more nationalist and transactional America would mean for their future.

But the sentiment that something fundamental had changed in relations with the United States was felt most strongly in Europe. "We have experienced a break in German-American, in European-American relations," Merkel said after Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal. Donald Tusk, president of the European Council, went further: "Looking at the latest decisions of Donald Trump, someone could even think: With friends like that, who needs enemies?" And Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, pointedly noted, "At this point, we have to replace the United

States, which as an international actor has lost vigor, and because of it, in the long term, influence."

These views were echoed widely across the continent, with newspapers running stories declaring the transatlantic alliance—a foundational pillar of American and European foreign policy for more than seventy years—at an end. Even Europeans not ready to give up on Washington were asking the question a former French ambassador to the United States posed: "How do we make [our relations with America] work with a U.S. leadership that doesn't want to play the role of leader?"

The questions asked in friendly capitals about the future of their relations with the United States highlighted an important lesson. Far more than Trump realized, America's friends and allies had choices about their future, including the choice to work without, or around, the United States. If he wanted to be transactional, they could be as well.

The willingness of allies to chart their own course was most obvious on trade. When Trump slapped tariffs on their imports, they responded in kind. And

Consider the consequences of Trump's skepticism of America's alliance commitments and his dismissal of efforts to promote democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.

rather than signing up to the bilateral deals he wanted, they looked elsewhere to strike new deals. Canada, Japan, and Mexico—three of America's top four trading partners—struck or extended free-trade agreements with the EU and worked with the other TPP signatory countries to create the TPP-11. Contrary to what Trump and his advisers insisted, America First increasingly looked like America Alone.

STRATEGIC DAMAGE

Did it matter that so many of America's friends and allies opposed and even resisted Trump's policies?

In the short term, the answer was no. Countries seldom change their security and economic policies overnight.

Throughout 2017 and into 2018, many of America's partners held out hope that Trump might eventually be persuaded to return to a traditional American foreign policy even as they criticized the choices he made. Their guiding principle, as one Washington foreign policy analyst put it, was, "Don't isolate him. Don't give into him. Don't give up on him." And countries like Japan, Mexico, and South Korea found it hard to break quickly with Washington.

Their security and prosperity were too heavily tied to America's to make it easy to chart an entirely new course.

But foreign policy decisions are not felt only in the moment. They also play out over time. And the fact that by the end of 2018 so many American friends and allies were seriously discussing giving up on Trump and beginning to edge away from Washington could have enormous consequences for the United States.

Common to all these China-led initiatives was that Beijing stood at the center—and the United States was excluded from all.

French President Emmanuel Macron highlighted the dynamic to reporters during his April 2018 visit to Washington. Trump's abandonment of global leadership

"can work in the short term," he noted, "but it's very insane in the medium to long term." And the reason was the long-term damage caused by loss of trust. Trump's conduct, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas noted after the disastrous G7 meeting in Québec, "shakes the certainty that we and the U.S. are allies in the fight for multilateralism and a rules-based world. And this certainty has, unfortunately, already been shaken so badly that it is bound to go beyond Trump's presidency."

PRAISE FOR AUTOCRATS

Consider the consequences of Trump's skepticism of America's alliance commitments and his dismissal of efforts to promote democracy, the

rule of law, and human rights. By questioning the value of alliances, Trump raised doubts in the minds of allies and adversaries alike about whether he would honor Washington's security commitments. That had the perverse effect of potentially emboldening adversaries, while encouraging friends to hedge their bets on dealing with other great powers, for fear that Washington would abandon them.

Thus, Japan, faced with questions about the durability of the American troop presence on its territory, sought more cooperative relations with China—just in case. “I want to lift up the Japan-China relationship to a new stage,” said Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe after meeting with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang for the first time in May 2018. The meeting, he noted, represented “an important first step toward a dramatic improvement” in relations.

And in Europe, the unified front against Russia that emerged in the wake of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine was starting to unravel as more and more countries sought to end Russia's isolation and improve bilateral relations.

Similarly, Trump's praise for autocrats; his lack of interest in challenging human rights abuses outside of

a few countries like Iran and Venezuela; and his attacks on journalists at home have weakened the forces abroad that shared America's values.

Autocrats around the globe used Trump's attacks on journalists to justify their decisions to suppress their critics. So the Chinese state news media dismissed reports that a human rights

activist had been tortured as “fake news,” and Syrian President Assad did the same in response to reports that thousands had been killed in Syrian prisons. It all

damaged America's image abroad. “In Latin America, the relationship with the U.S. has gone from the aspirational to the transactional,” lamented Jorge Gujardo, a retired Mexican diplomat. “There's this idea that the States is just like the rest of us. That's the saddest thing to me.”

ABDICATION OF RESPONSIBILITY

Even more important than Trump's decisions on specific issues was their cumulative effect. The rules-based order created after World War II that shaped world politics was neither inevitable nor necessarily permanent. It resulted from conscious American leadership. Trump's abdication of that leadership raised two possible future scenarios, neither of them reassuring.

Even more important than Trump's decisions on specific issues was their cumulative effect.

One is a world in which no one leads. That might mean a return to the world of the late nineteenth century, with great powers carving out spheres of influence that they can dominate. Or it could mean a world of ever-growing disarray, as no single power or combination of powers has the capacity or the will to maintain international order.

Either version of a world with no leader would leave the United States poorer and less secure than if it continued to lead globally. Too many of today's problems spill across borders: climate change, nuclear proliferation, terrorism—just to name a few pressing problems—will not be solved by one or even a few countries acting alone. Active leadership is required to marshal effective global responses to these cross-border challenges.

At the same time, retreating to regional spheres of influence, or to within one's own borders, would inhibit the global trade on which so much of today's prosperity is dependent. And it would offer the prospect of a return to the very instability and great-power wars that America's post-World War II leadership sought to prevent.

To be sure, the United States would likely fare better than most other

countries in such a world. But that is not the same as doing well.

The alternative outcome is that another country fills the leadership vacuum created by Trump's abdication.

The best outcome would be if one or more of America's allies took the baton of global leadership.

But none of America's allies or friends is up to the task. Europe is consumed with growing populism and nationalism, continued econom-

ic and financial woes, and Brexit. Japan and India both lack the power and the will to be more than regional powers. As for America's adversaries, Russia has the will, but lacks the economic power and political appeal to create what its foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, called a “post-West world order.”

But unlike all of his predecessors since Truman, Trump didn't see global leadership as the solution to what ailed America. On the contrary, he saw it as the problem.

AMERICA FIRST, CHINA FIRST

China, though, is another matter. President Xi Jinping has abandoned the time-tested strategy, first embraced by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, to “hide your strength, bide your time, and never take the lead.” Instead, he is reasserting China's greatness, and Trump's election provided a grand strategic opportunity. That became clear in October 2017, during the 19th Communist Party Congress.

In a path-breaking address, Xi warned that “no country alone can address the many challenges facing mankind; no country can afford to retreat into self-isolation.” But if America were to do so, then a newly confident China was more than happy to take its place. Xi declared the arrival of a “new era” for China, one that would see it “moving closer to center stage and making greater contributions to mankind.” And he offered “a new option for other countries,” an alternative that was based on “Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind.” Xi’s challenge to America was not just economic, but also ideological.

“As the U.S. retreats globally,” Chinese Major General Jin Yinan noted gleefully, “China shows up.” And China was showing up everywhere—with checkbook in hand. Its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, a \$1 trillion investment in ports and overland routes in more than 60 countries, created new bonds across south and central Asia, all the way to Europe and North Africa. It invested large sums in Africa and Latin America, opening new markets and creating new dependencies.

With decades of double-digit growth in defense spending, China had built a conventional military force that was second in size and capability only to the United States. Long focused on territorial defense, China now projected

military power well beyond its shores, creating an intimidating presence in the disputed islands chains of the South China Sea, opening its first foreign military base in Djibouti, and conducting naval exercises with Russia in the Mediterranean and Baltic Seas.

Beijing also set up a host of new multilateral institutions, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the New Development Bank, the Asian Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the 16+1 framework between China and East and Central European countries, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Common to all these China-led initiatives was that Beijing stood at the center—and the United States was excluded from all.

A Chinese-dominated world would not be friendly to the United States. Beijing has little incentive to resolve security crises to Washington’s satisfaction. It did nothing to persuade Washington to stick with the Iran nuclear deal, seeing America’s withdrawal as an opportunity to strengthen its own ties with Tehran. And while Beijing did pressure North Korea, its own security interests differ from Washington’s, thus complicating any negotiations on a deal with Pyongyang.

As for trade, Beijing has no interest in writing trade rules that favor American firms. And Xi’s China would

surely be the last country to champion democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Indeed, China’s foreign policy has sought to expand Beijing’s options overseas at Washington’s expense. That is what great powers do. Trump’s abdication of America’s global leadership role has made this challenge possible far sooner than would have otherwise been the case.

China’s ascendance to global leader is by no means guaranteed. It faces numerous internal challenges, including an aging workforce, deep regional and economic inequalities, and a potentially brittle political system. Just as importantly, China has few friends. Other countries certainly envy China’s rapid growth, but “no one wants to be China,” as one Asian diplomat put it. The reason is straightforward. They fear that China seeks domination and not cooperation. “China uses its money to buy off many leaders,” one senior Vietnamese general noted, “but none of the countries that are its close allies, like North Korea, Pakistan or Cambodia, have done well. Countries that are close to America have done much better.”

Even so, with the United States abdicating its longstanding global leadership role, America was finding it increasingly difficult to

dissuade countries from following Beijing’s lead. In early 2018, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson warned African and Latin American leaders not to be taken in by “new imperial powers that seek only to benefit their own people.” But his words had little effect. “I think that with this attitude the United States is leaving a void, and that void may be filled by China,” responded President

Sebastián Piñera of Chile. Moussa Faki Mahamat, chairman of the African Union Commission, said much the same thing: “I think Africans are mature enough to engage in partnerships of their own volition.”

Besides, in cutting back on foreign aid and closing markets to foreign products, the United States offered little incentive to follow its lead. “If you are not there,” Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsieng Loong explained, “then everybody else in the world will look around and say, I want to be friends with both the U.S. and the Chinese—and the Chinese are ready, and I’ll start with them.”

REINVIGORATING AMERICA

The tragedy of America’s abdication of global leadership is that it was unnecessary. The United States was not the pitiful, wounded giant

Trump was not interested in securing the cooperation of other countries. He wanted to take back what they had taken from America.

Trump repeatedly described, the victim of carnage inflicted by greedy friends and uncaring elites. Had Trump been more willing to listen and learn, he might have fashioned a foreign policy that addressed the real problems he had inveighed against for three decades. That would have meant not repelling friends and allies, but rallying them in a common cause.

The potential still exists to reinvigorate American global leadership. Trump unintentionally has set the grounds for such a renewal.

“Nothing is possible without allies and partners,” Rex Tillerson noted in his parting remarks to reporters after being fired as secretary of state. “Our strength as a nation,” Jim Mattis wrote in his resignation letter, “is inextricably linked to the strength of our unique and comprehensive system of alliances and partnerships.” Indeed, friends and allies are one of the keys to America’s global power and success. It is what separates the United States from strategic competitors like China and Russia.

Washington has fifty-five formal allies all across the world and many others, like Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, that are effectively allies. In contrast, Moscow has five formal allies (stalwarts like Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), and Beijing has just one (North Korea).

And whereas Russian and Chinese allies are clients that must heed their far more powerful patrons, America’s are friends. And they are powerful friends. Six of the top ten economies are American allies; together they nearly equal America’s economy in size. And five of the top ten military spenders in the world are treaty allies who together spend more on defense than China and Russia combined.

The potential still exists to reinvigorate American global leadership. Trump unintentionally has set the grounds for such a renewal. Much as oxygen goes unnoticed until it is gone, his refusal to lead showed allies how much they had invested in the international order—and how essential American leadership was to maintaining that order.

Their concerted efforts to find ways to work with Trump—despite deep-seated differences over issues such as climate change, trade, and Iran, and despite his frequent use of ham-handed tactics and petty insults—showed that they understood that the underlying bargain between leader and followers needed to be revised. They looked for ways to take on more of the burden of collective defense, to make the rules of international trade



Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump join Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the opening of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

more effective and more congenial to the United States, and to otherwise do more to take a greater role in helping to solve some of the world’s greatest challenges. As Macron put it: “The United States is the premier power; it is our most important partner in multilateral endeavors; it’s our first partner in the fight against terrorism; it is important for collective security. We can be angry with the United States, we may disagree about the methods, as we do on Iran, but at the end, we are in agreement.”

In short, America’s allies still needed it to lead the Free World.

At the same time, Trump’s foreign policy choices also reminded Americans of the benefits of global leadership. Trump’s election spurred much talk about how Americans had turned inward, disillusioned by the costs of overseas interventions and the weight of global responsibilities. But that was, and remains, a minority view in the United States.

Poll after poll has confirmed a majority of Americans consistently favor American engagement abroad and see alliances as one of the most effective means by which the United States can advance its interests in the world. And

on issues such as the importance of defending allies for American security and the domestic economic benefits of trade, public support has actually increased since Trump took office.

Americans, too, seemingly gained a greater appreciation of the costs of America First. And while shifting opinions hardly constituted a public demand for a course shift, they signaled that Americans were prepared to support one—if somebody led the way.

Renewing American global leadership and deepening the partnership with friends and allies will not be easy, and they will not wait indefinitely for the United States to return to its cooperative ways. Nor will reasserting American leadership miraculously sweep away the challenges facing the United States.

American power is in relative decline just as China's power rises. Russia remains dedicated to restoring its dominance in its neighborhood and dividing the Western alliance. Europe continues to struggle with anemic economic growth, swelling national debts, a rising tide of nationalism and populism, and debates about the EU's

very purpose and future. Emerging powers like Brazil and India are more interested in the perks of great-power status than its responsibilities.

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Globalization continues to generate new and messy problems, ranging from infectious diseases, via financial contagions, to nuclear proliferation and terrorism.

But all these trends will continue if the United States stays on the path of America First. Indeed, by running roughshod over friends and allies, Trump has added to America's burdens rather than reducing them, making the challenges it faces larger and harder to address. As much as he berated allies for not carrying their weight and for taking advantage of the United States, they were force multipliers for American power and American values.

In fact, they were essential to competing effectively with China and securing many of the goals Trump had set—including a freer and fairer trade regime, a stronger response to terrorism, and an end to the nuclear threat from North Korea and Iran. The observation one Asian diplomat made was inescapable: "America is stronger

and greater with friends." The key to winning again, to put it in Trumpian terms, is by leading again.

That was the point that Mattis tried to make to Trump in the Tank in July 2017. Trump did not listen then, or later, even as criticisms of his decisions mounted and one policy initiative after another foundered. He instead doubled down on his commitment to

America First. Many of the advisers who attended the meeting in the Tank, and who sought to tame his foreign policy instincts, have been fired or have resigned. In their place, Trump has surrounded himself with advisers like National Security Adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who were more inclined to confirm his beliefs than to challenge them.

Donald Trump has wagered that the United States could secure the benefits of the world it created without bearing the burdens of leading it. That bet is unlikely to pay off.

The July 2018 trip to Europe showed Trump acting on his America First vision. He was convinced that global leadership had hurt rather than helped

the United States, and he intended to set things straight. He would no longer allow countries to take advantage of America by calling themselves friends and allies. "It's not going to be that way anymore," he insisted in Helsinki. "You've got to pay up. You've got to pay up. You got to pay more."

Other countries were not potential partners that could help advance American interests. They were instead competitors he planned to beat. He wanted to win because there is "nothing like winning, you got to win." What Trump did not recognize was that the price for winning rather than leading will be large—a world in greater disarray and an America that is less prosperous, less secure, and perhaps even less free. ●