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The Lost Generation in American Foreign Policy

How American Influence Has Declined, and What Can Be Done About It

In the aftermath of World War II, the United States accepted the mantle of global leadership and worked to build a new global order based on the principles of nonaggression and open, nondiscriminatory trade. An early pillar of this new order was the Marshall Plan for European reconstruction, which British historian Norman Davies has called “an act of the most enlightened self-interest in history.”¹ America’s leaders didn’t regard this as charity. They recognized that a more peaceful and more prosperous world would be in America’s self-interest.

American willingness to shoulder the burdens of world leadership survived a costly stalemate in the Korean War and a still more costly defeat in Vietnam. It even survived the end of the Cold War, the original impetus for America’s global activism. But as a new century progressed, this support weakened, America’s influence slowly diminished, and eventually even the desire to exert global leadership waned. Over the past two decades, the United States experienced a dramatic drop-off in international achievement. A generation of Americans have come of age in an era in which foreign policy setbacks have been more frequent than advances.

Awareness of America's declining influence became commonplace among observers during the Barack Obama administration and has taken on a sharper and more partisan edge during the age of Donald Trump. "America will never again experience the global dominance it enjoyed in the 17 years between the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 and the financial crisis of 2008. Those days are over," wrote British journalist Gideon Rachman, back in 2011.² The following year, Charles Kupchan wrote, "The United States will remain one of the world's leading powers for the balance of the 21st century, but it must recognize the waning of the West's primacy and work to shepherd the transition to a world it no longer dominates."³ In June 2016, Aaron David Miller and Richard Sokolsky wrote, "If the past 25 years of U.S. foreign policy demonstrates anything, it is the limits of America's power to pursue transformational change in a cruel and recalcitrant world."⁴ Perceptions of declining American influence gained greater prominence during President Trump's time in office under headlines such as "America's Global Influence Has Dwindled Under Donald Trump," in *The Economist*; "The Decline of U.S. Influence is the Great Global Story of Our Age," in the *Washington Post*; and "Trump Fast-Forwards American Decline," in the *New York Times*.⁵ America's slow and poorly managed response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has further diminished its international standing. "What international observers are seeing today," writes Hal Brands, "is that the country that claims to lead the world has so far turned in a distinctly underwhelming performance in dealing with the greatest global crisis of this century."⁶ The absence of American leadership in battling this global threat, in contrast to the prominent roles played by George W. Bush in dealing with the human

immunodeficiency virus (HIV) epidemic and by Obama with Ebola, has also been widely noted.

In this Perspective, we seek to gauge the extent of decline in America's international influence, to determine its causes, and to suggest means for its reversal. By *American international influence*, we mean the capacity to affect the behavior of other states and societies in pursuit of national policy objectives. Power guided by policy produces influence, which shapes behavior. *Hard power* is the capacity to reward cooperation and penalize its absence; *soft power* is the ability to inspire trust, affection, and emulation, thereby easing the task of securing cooperation.

We employ two methods of gauging American international influence. The first is polling data measuring foreign public regard for and confidence in the United States. The second is an account of significant foreign policy achievements over time. Both methods show a sharp decline of influence over the past 20 years. We then seek possible explanations for this decline in the policy choices of successive administrations, in changes in American society, and in alterations in the global environment. We posit our own explanation and conclude by suggesting how the United States might regain its fading preeminence.

Diminished Global Regard

"As the 2020s dawn, it is hard to find any member of the U.S. foreign policy establishment who does not believe that the United States is in decline and that the waning of its influence has accelerated under a president who seems to revel in attacking U.S. allies and enemies alike," wrote Ruchir Sharma.⁷ He contests this decline, citing the continued strength of the U.S. economy. He notes that

the U.S. share (25 percent) of global economic power has essentially held steady for four decades. “Over this period, the European Union saw its share fall from 35 percent to 21 percent. Japan’s share slipped from ten percent to six percent, and Russia’s dropped from three percent to two percent. Meanwhile, China’s share swelled during that time from two percent to 16 percent. So, it is true that as China has risen, other major powers have declined. But the United States is not one of them.”⁸

Yet influence is, to a degree, in the eye of the beholder. To be regarded as influential is itself a form of influence. To be regarded as a declining power makes it more difficult to get one’s way. A nation’s hard power can be calculated largely in economic and military terms, as Sharma suggests. By these measures, America’s global weight has not significantly diminished in recent decades. The United States continues to spend more on its military than all conceivable rivals combined.⁹ It has led global economic growth among the world’s advanced economies for most of the past 40 years. The U.S. private sector also projects substantial and, in some cases, growing international influence. This includes software and information technology (e.g., Silicon Valley, Microsoft), financial services (e.g., the New York financial market, U.S. global banks), oil and gas (the United States is the world’s largest producer), movies and computer games (each a major U.S. export), medical research and high-end treatment (which attracts many world leaders), commercial aircraft (Boeing), computer chips, pharmaceuticals, avionics, satellites, great universities, and even think tanks. Not all of this private-sector influence can be harnessed in support of American foreign policy, however.

While America’s hard power, as reflected in its economic and military weight, is largely undiminished, its soft power—that is, its capacity to retain the trust, inspire the affection, and encourage emulation by others—has measurably declined. Opinion surveys conducted repeatedly over the past couple of decades have shown a marked reduction in regard for and confidence in the United States among foreign publics, notably including those in countries that Washington has long counted on to follow its lead. Tables 1 and 2 show the results of public opinion polling conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project.¹⁰ Table 1 tracks the percentage of citizens in selected publics with a favorable view of the United States. In most countries, positive views of the United States plummeted during the Bush administration and improved under the Obama administration, only to fall again thereafter.

Table 2 shows the percentage of publics with confidence in the U.S. president to do the right thing in world affairs. Survey results for this question follow a similar pattern: Confidence in the U.S. president falls during the Bush administration, rebounds during the Obama administration, and declines again during the Trump administration.

American influence has also declined compared with U.S. competitors. Figure 1 shows that, since 2017, more people around the globe considered the United States a greater threat to their security than either China or Russia. In 2013, only one-quarter across 23 countries saw American power as a major threat to their country. That number jumped substantially to 38 percent in 2017 and to 45 percent in 2018.

Separate polls taken in Germany, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom show the erosion of confidence in

TABLE 1

Percentage of Citizens in Selected Publics with a Favorable View of the United States

In Tables 1 and 2, positive changes from the earlier survey are represented by a green box, while negative changes from the earlier survey are represented by a red box.

Country	1999/2000	2007	2015	2019	Overall Change 1999–2019
Germany	78	30	50	39	-39
United Kingdom	83	51	65	48	-35
Italy	76	53	83	62	-14
France	62	39	73	48	-14
Poland	66	61	74	79	+13
Russia	37	41	15	29	-8
Turkey	52	9	29	20	-32
Japan	77	61	68	68	-9
South Korea	58	58	84	77	+19
Indonesia	75	29	62	42	-33
Canada	71	55	68	51	-20
Mexico	68	56	66	36	-32

SOURCES: Pew Research Center, Global Indicators Database, “Opinion of the United States,” webpage, undated-c; Pew Research Center, “What the World Thinks in 2002,” webpage, December 2002.

NOTES: The countries in this table, which include most major U.S. treaty allies, were selected based on whether 1999/2000 data were available to show the trend over the 20th century. We selected the years 2007 and 2015 because they represent the nadir and peak in the Bush and Obama administrations, respectively, and the year 2019 because it represents the most recent year of the Trump administration in which Pew data were available. The full wording for the question on U.S. favorability is as follows: “Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of the United States.” In Table 1, *favorable* combines “very favorable” and “somewhat favorable” responses. Pew began asking this question of global publics in 2002. To capture data in 1999/2000, Pew used survey data provided by the Office of Research, U.S. Department of State (Canada trend by Environics). We have also included those data in the first column.

the United States continuing into 2020. Germans are almost equally divided on whether Washington or Beijing is the more important partner, with 37 percent choosing the United States and 36 percent China. This represents a significant shift even when compared with the last such survey in September 2019, when Germans gave the United States a commanding 26–percentage point edge

over China. Another survey asked French people which countries were best placed to confront the challenges of the coming decades. Just 3 percent chose the United States. Among Italians, 36 percent believe their country should focus on developing close ties with China, compared with 30 percent who chose the United States. Just 28 percent of Britons said they trusted the United States to act

TABLE 2

Percentage of Publics with Confidence in the U.S. President to Do the Right Thing

Country	April–May 2003	2008	2016	2019	Overall Change 2003–2019
Germany	33	14	86	13	-20
United Kingdom	51	16	79	32	-29
France	20	13	84	20	0
Spain	26	8	75	21	-5
Australia	59	23	84	35	-24
Argentina	50	16	43	41	-9
Kenya	94	87	84	60	-34

SOURCES: Pew Research Center, Global Indicators Database, “Confidence in the U.S. President,” webpage, undated-b; Pew Research Center, *Views of a Changing World (Topline Data)*, Washington, D.C., June 2003, p. T-154.

NOTES: Pew conducted this survey for the first time in August 2001 but polled publics only in Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, and France. The year 2003 was provided to give baseline data for those countries outside of Western Europe. The year 2008 represents the nadir during the Bush administration. While the year 2009 was technically the peak during the Obama administration for this question, we opted to include the year 2016 instead (the second peak during the Obama administration) to capture results from later in Obama’s term. 2019 represents the most recent year in which data were available in the Trump administration. Because Pew does not survey publics in every country each year, we chose countries that had been polled in all four years surveyed (2003, 2008, 2016, and 2019). The full wording for the question on confidence in the U.S. president is as follows: “Now I’m going to read a list of political leaders. For each, tell me how much confidence you have in each leader to do the right thing regarding world affairs—a lot of confidence, some confidence, not too much confidence, or no confidence at all.” In Table 2, *confidence* combines “a lot of confidence” and “some confidence” responses.

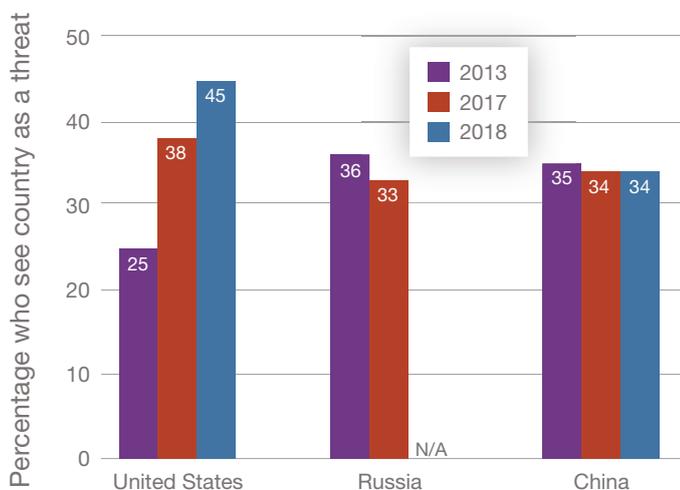
responsibly in the world, a fall of 13 percent over just five months.¹¹

Waning Foreign Policy Accomplishment

Power translates into influence when deployed in pursuit of a policy objective. To gauge variations in the level of American influence over time, we have looked to what U.S. foreign policy has achieved year after year since the

country’s emergence as a global power after World War II. Our criteria for inclusion are American actions that are generally assessed as having made enduring contributions to a more peaceful and more prosperous world by shaping global norms, building international institutions, stemming aggression, reducing the risk of nuclear conflict, galvanizing global opinion, and promoting widespread economic growth. These achievements are presented in Table 3 and detailed further in the appendix. We have included, for illustrative purposes, major failures,

FIGURE 1
Global Publics See United States as Greater Threat Than Russia or China



SOURCE: Jacob Poushter and Christine Huang, *Climate Change Still Seen as the Top Global Threat, but Cyberattacks a Rising Concern*, Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, February 10, 2019.

initiatives that seemed consequential at the time but had little lasting impact, and accomplishments that were potentially consequential but have since been abandoned.

We credit Presidents Truman and Eisenhower each with 11 such major foreign policy achievements, Kennedy and Johnson with a combined total of eight, Nixon and Ford with a total of six, Carter with six, Reagan and Bush (41) with seven each, and Clinton with eight. In contrast, this century’s presidents—Bush (43), Obama, and Trump—count a combined total of only five such achievements among them. Thus, from 1945 to 2000, the average annual rate of major achievement was about one per year.

Since 2001, this rate has fallen to about one every four years.

Depending on one’s definition of *major*, this list could be expanded or contracted, but the result would likely follow the same pattern. Not surprisingly, American accomplishments peaked in the early post–World War II years, those of “the creation,” as Dean Acheson dubbed that era. The number rose again in the aftermath of the Cold War, with the emergence of a “new world order,” in the words of George H. W. Bush. The pace of positive achievement was sustained with only a slight diminution between these two high points. Neither the Korean War stalemate, the Watergate crisis, nor the loss of Vietnam significantly slowed America’s constructive international activism.

In contrast, the current century has seen fewer advances and more numerous setbacks. Bush 43 became mired in the never-ending Afghan and Iraqi conflicts and the wider “global war on terror.” Obama’s potentially significant foreign policy achievements were nearly all reversed by his successor. Trump’s major diplomatic initiatives have yet to bear fruit. North Korea may give up its nuclear weapons, Iran may cease its malign behavior, the Afghan adversaries may make an enduring peace, and the trade deficit with China may be closed, but, as of this writing, all these efforts appear to be long shots.

Why Has American Influence Declined?

The causes for the waning of American influence have been the topic of voluminous commentary. Observers have offered varied explanations. Some look to changes in American society and others to faults in U.S. policy, both

TABLE 3
Enduring Foreign Policy Achievements and Failures from Truman to Trump



HARRY S. TRUMAN 1945–1953

11/1	
June 1945	Founding of the United Nations +
December 1945	Creation of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade +
March 1947	Military aid to Turkey and Greece +
May 1947	Recognition of the state of Israel +
June 1947	Marshall Plan +
June 1948	Berlin airlift +
April 1949	Creation of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) +
May 1949	Creation of West Germany +
October 1949	Loss of China -
June 1950	United States enters Korean War +/-
June 1950	Neutralization of Taiwan Strait +
September 1951	Japan Peace Treaty/U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty +

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER 1953–1961

7/3	
July 1953	Armistice ends the Korean War +
August 1953	CIA-backed coup in Iran +/-

TABLE 3—CONTINUED

July 1954	Creation of South Vietnam	+/-
September 1954	First Taiwan Strait crisis	+
May 1955	NATO enlargement (West Germany)	+
October 1956	The Suez Crisis	+
March 1957	Treaty of Rome	+
July 1958	Marines to Lebanon	+
August 1958	Second Taiwan Strait crisis	+
May 1960	U-2 Incident	-

JOHN F. KENNEDY 1961–1963

5/3



April 1961	Bay of Pigs	-
May 1961	Increased advisers and Special Forces to Vietnam	-
June 1961	Vienna Summit	-
October 1961	Berlin confrontation	+
October 1962	Cuban Missile Crisis	+
1961–1962	Creation of U.S. Agency for International Development, Peace Corps, Alliance for Progress, Food for Peace	+
June 1963	“Ich bin ein Berliner” speech	+
August 1963	Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty	+

LYNDON B. JOHNSON 1963–1969

3/1



August 1964	Gulf of Tonkin incident and deployment of U.S. troops to Vietnam	-
April 1965	Marines to the Dominican Republic	/

TABLE 3—CONTINUED

June 1967	Conclusion of Kennedy Round	+
October 1967	Outer Space Treaty	+
July 1968	Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty	+
RICHARD M. NIXON 1969–1974		
4/3		
March 1969	Invasion of Cambodia	-
February 1972	Opening to China	+
April 1972	Biological Weapons Convention	+
May 1972	Strategic Arms Limitation Talks I and Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty	+
January 1973	Vietnam peace agreement	+/-
September 1973	U.S. support for counter-Allende coup in Chile	+/-
October 1973	Yom Kippur War and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy	+
GERALD R. FORD 1974–1977		
2/1		
April 1975	Fall of South Vietnam	-
August 1975	Helsinki Final Act	+
November 1975	First annual G6 (later G7 and G8) Summit at Rambouillet	+
JIMMY CARTER 1977–1981		
6/1		
August 1977	Panama Canal Treaties	+
January 1979	Diplomatic recognition of People's Republic of China and Taiwan Relations Act	+
March 1979	Camp David Accords	+

TABLE 3—CONTINUED

June 1979	Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty II	+
July 1979	Aid to Afghan mujahidin	+
December 1979	NATO Double-Track Decision	+
January 1979–January 1981	Fall of the Shah and the Iranian hostage crisis	-

RONALD W. REAGAN 1981–1989**7/2**

May 1982	NATO enlargement (Spain)	+
August 1982	Marine barracks bombing and U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon	-
October 1983	Invasion of Grenada	+
September 1985	Plaza Accord	+
April 1986	Bombing of Libya	+
August 1985–March 1987	Iran-Contra Affair	-
June 1987	“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall” speech	+
December 1987	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty	+
1982–1987	Military buildup and arms control negotiation	+

GEORGE H. W. BUSH 1989–1993**8/0**

December 1989	Panama intervention (Operation Just Cause)	+
June 1990	Chemical Weapons Convention	+
September 1990	Reunification of Germany	+
November 1990	Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty	+
January 1991	First Gulf War	+
July 1991	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty	+

TABLE 3—CONTINUED

October 1991	Madrid Peace Conference	+
December 1991	Cooperative Threat Reduction Program	+
WILLIAM J. CLINTON 1993–2001		
8/2		
January 1994	North American Free Trade Agreement	+
October 1993–March 1994	Black Hawk Down and U.S. withdrawal from Somalia	-
April 1994	Rwandan genocide	-
April 1994	Conclusion of the Uruguay Round and establishment of the World Trade Organization	+
October 1994	Intervention in Haiti	/
October 1994	North Korea Agreed Framework	/
September 1993–1995	Oslo Peace Accords and Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty	+
December 1995	Dayton Peace Agreement and end of Bosnian Civil War	+
November 1998	Kyoto Protocol on climate change	/
March 1999	Kosovo air war and Serbian withdrawal	+
March 1999	NATO enlargement (Poland, Hungary, Czechia)	+
December 1999	Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement	+
August 2000	Plan Colombia	+
GEORGE W. BUSH 2001–2009		
2/4		
March 2001	U.S. withdrawal from Kyoto Protocol on climate change	-
September 2001	September 11 attacks and the Afghan invasion	-/+/-
June 2002	Abrogation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty	/

TABLE 3—CONTINUED

March 2003	Iraq War	-
May 2003	President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief anti-human immunodeficiency virus initiative	+
March 2006	Civil nuclear cooperation agreement with India	+
December 2007	Russia and then NATO suspend the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty	-

BARACK H. OBAMA 2009–2017

2/2



February 2011	New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty	+
March 2011	NATO intervention in Libya	+/-
August 2012	Syrian civil war	-
May 2014	Ottawa Treaty (Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention)	/
July 2015	Iran Nuclear Agreement	/
July 2015	Diplomatic normalization with Cuba	/
February 2016	Trans-Pacific Partnership	/
November 2016	Paris Climate Accord	/
August 2014–January 2017	Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria campaign	-/+

DONALD J. TRUMP 2017–

1/5



January 2017	Trans-Pacific Partnership withdrawal	-
January 2017	Paris Climate Accord withdrawal	-
October 2017	Fall of Raqqa and end of Islamic State caliphate	+
May 2018	Iran deal withdrawal	?
July 2018	Trade war with China	?

TABLE 3—CONTINUED

June 2019	New North American Free Trade Agreement	/
October 2019	Pullback of U.S. troops from eastern Syria	—
December 2019	Blocking of World Trade Organization dispute mechanism	—
January 2020	Lifting of land mine ban	—
March 2020	U.S.-Taliban Agreement	?
March 2018–	Nuclear diplomacy with Democratic People’s Republic of Korea	?

groups seeing the decline as self-inflicted. Still others point to alterations in the international environment, attributing the loss of influence to changing external circumstances and shifts in the global power balance.

The Fault Is in Ourselves

One stream of analysis traces the decline in America’s international influence to domestic divisions and diminished public support for active international engagement. “The core problem in American foreign policy remains the disconnect between the establishment’s ambitious global agenda and the limited engagement that voters appear to support,” asserts Robert Kagan.¹² Walter Russell Mead also finds a gap between the consensus in Washington and the views of most Americans on foreign policy.¹³ Richard Fontaine and Harry Krejsa both argue that the American middle class increasingly questions whether American engagement abroad and global growth are enhancing their own prosperity.¹⁴ Several scholars argue that increasingly toxic domestic politics have led to less effective policy abroad. Kenneth Schultz, for example, maintains that although American hard power remains intact, “partisan

polarization hampers the country’s ability to use that power effectively.”¹⁵ Stephen Walt agrees, noting that “excessive polarization is decreasing the ability to do things that can keep the country on top for a long time.”¹⁶ Others blame the growth of an imperial presidency, unconstrained by Congress and public opinion, as the source of many ill-conceived international endeavors.¹⁷

Or in Our Policies

Twenty-first century American foreign policy has been criticized for its overreliance on force, its unrealistic objectives, and its lack of strategic coherence. William Burns cites the post-September 11, 2001, “inversion of force and diplomacy.” Monica Duffy Toft coined the phrase “kinetic diplomacy” to describe the reduction of U.S. foreign policy tools to a “unilateral hammer.”¹⁸ Doug Bandow asserts that “the U.S. record since September 11 has been uniquely counterproductive. Washington adopted a policy—highlighted by launching new wars, killing more civilians, and ravaging additional societies—guaranteed to create enemies, exacerbate radicalism, and spread terrorism. Blowback is everywhere.”¹⁹ Other scholars also point

to the increased reliance on coercive financial tools. A task force organized by the Center for a New American Security found that the aggressive use of financial measures to coerce cooperation with the United States is stoking a backlash. Russia, China, and even the European Union are moving to reduce their reliance on American financial markets by developing alternative payment channels or regional currency trading blocs that do not depend on the U.S. dollar for international transactions.²⁰ Others blame the decline on the absence of a grand strategy to guide American policies.²¹ Thomas Wright suggests that “the United States is currently adrift and uncertainty about its future role is destabilizing the international system.”²² Dominic Tierney attributes this strategic drift to the lack of an existential rival, such as the Soviet Union, suggesting that perhaps China may come to fill this void.²³ Other authors argue that post–Cold War triumphalism led to unduly aspirational policies, with the consequent setbacks resulting in a loss of self-confidence.²⁴

Or in Our Stars

Still other commentators cite growing external limitations on the reach of American influence. “The real challenge the United States faces could be called ‘the rise of the rest,’” asserts Joe Nye.²⁵ Charles Kupchan argues that the changing world order is marked by a broad diffusion of power and the emergence of “multiple modernities” that reduce the dominance of Western values.²⁶ The rise of China, which by some measures has already surpassed the United States as the world’s preeminent economy, has created an alternate pole of attraction. Martin Wolf concludes that the 2008 global financial crisis marked “a humiliating end to the ‘unipolar moment.’” As Western policymakers struggle,

their credibility lies broken.”²⁷ Others point to technological innovations that afford both state and nonstate actors the capacity to offset traditional forms of power. “We may be entering an era in which small states and even nonstate actors will attempt to deter the United States through denial or punishment,” writes T. X. Hammes.²⁸

All the Above

There is something to all these explanations, but a shift in the global power balance seems the least sufficient. The growth in the Soviet Union’s power during and after the Second World War acted as a spur to American achievement throughout the Cold War, not an excuse for its absence. China is the only challenger to have since grown more powerful, but this is more a problem for the future than an explanation for the setbacks that have marked American policy over the past two decades. China was not responsible for 9/11, the global war on terror, the failure to stabilize Afghanistan and Iraq, the Iranian nuclear program, the Great Recession, the rise of the Islamic State, the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, or Russian aggression in Ukraine. Nor was China even a serious impediment to American efforts to address these challenges.

The decline in American influence seems best explained by the classic cycle of hubris followed by nemesis. An American sense of omnipotence was encouraged by victory in the Cold War and continued to mount throughout the following decade with success in the first Gulf War, the subsequent pacification of the Balkans, and a generally buoyant economy. Provoked by the attacks of 9/11 and further encouraged by the rapid fall of the Taliban and dispersal of Al Qaeda, American leaders launched a global war on terror, embraced a policy of military preemption to deal

with nuclear proliferators, invaded Iraq, and declared the intention of turning that country into a democratic model for the rest of the Middle East. These multiple missions strained the capacity of the United States. None was completed satisfactorily. Instead, the United States found itself bogged down in classic quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan and entangled in a growing number of smaller conflicts throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The war in Iraq became a major drain on the Bush administration's energies, attention, and credibility. Then, in 2008, came the global financial crisis, another product of American "irrational exuberance."²⁹ The Great Recession gave rise to a populist reaction in the United States on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. The Tea Party and the Occupy Wall Street movements were eventually reabsorbed within the two major parties, driving these parties still further apart. In 2016, a nontraditional candidate running on a populist, antiestablishment, and antiglobalist platform won the American presidency.

This sequence—success, overconfidence, overstretch, failure, and retreat—illustrates how domestic politics, foreign policy, and external events interacted to diminish American influence. Yet these factors do not fully account for the depth and duration of the reaction. The Vietnam War cost more American lives than all of America's 21st century conflicts combined. It ended not in stalemate but with the loss of everything the United States had been fighting for. That defeat was also accompanied by an economic shock, the 1973 Arab oil embargo, which slowed growth worldwide and helped produce an extended period of "stagflation." Yet American diplomacy quickly recovered its momentum in the wake of that lost war and the attendant domestic turmoil. Elected in 1976, the year after the fall of Saigon, President Carter briefly flirted

with retrenchment, but, by the end of his term, he had brokered a lasting peace between Israel and Egypt, committed the United States to the defense of the Persian Gulf, begun covert support for the anti-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan, secured European agreement to the deployment of nuclear-armed intermediate-range missiles, and reasserted the role of human rights in American diplomacy. In 1980, President Reagan was elected, and it was "morning in America" again. Over the following decade, he and George H. W. Bush consolidated American leadership of the free world; expanded democracy; deterred aggression; negotiated nuclear-arms reductions; and helped liberate Eastern Europe, reunify Germany, and win the Cold War.

A World Order in Question

While the loss in Vietnam proved only a brief drag on America's global standing, this century's international setbacks have led many Americans to question the most basic tenets of modern American foreign policy, including the value of alliances, the promotion of democracy, the benefits of free trade, and the continuous development of a rules-based order in furtherance of those objectives. As a result, a growing number of books and articles have bemoaned the premature demise of the "American century" that opened with this country's entry into World War II and the international system subsequently created under American auspices.

Seen in the light of history, and particularly that of the first half of the 20th century, the positive record of that system is striking. Since 1945, there have been no wars between major powers and very few between smaller states.³⁰ The business cycle has been moderated, even if not

eliminated. The subsequent seven decades have seen almost continuous economic growth, dramatically reducing global poverty and lifting nearly half the world's population into the middle class.³¹ In just the past three decades, 1 billion people have moved out of extreme poverty. Child mortality around the world has dropped by 58 percent over this same period³² and maternal mortality by 43 percent.³³ Diseases including polio, leprosy, river blindness, and elephantiasis are on the decline, and global efforts have turned the tide on AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).³⁴ Never before in history has such a large proportion of humanity lived so long or so well.

The coronavirus pandemic would seem to undermine this rosy view of a world order. It is worth recalling, however, that long before globalization, before even the realization that the Earth was round, as early as 10,000 BCE, smallpox was carried by Egyptian merchants to India, and the disease was not eradicated until 1980.³⁵ The bubonic plague struck both Europe and Asia in the mid-1300s.³⁶ And the 1918 outbreak of the “Spanish flu” remains the deadliest pandemic in history, with 50 million deaths worldwide and 675,000 occurring in the United States alone.³⁷ More recently, the now more-globalized world has seen multiple waves of Ebola, starting in 1976, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in 2003, swine flu in 2009 (a resurgence of H1N1), and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome in 2012, none of which have had nearly the toll of those earlier plagues.³⁸

Over the past two decades, further development of a rules-based international system has slowed and even begun to reverse. President George W. Bush “unsigned” the agreement establishing the International Criminal Court, abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. President

Trump has withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Paris Climate Accord, the Iran nuclear agreement, and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia. His administration has ended the World Trade Organization's ability to resolve disputes³⁹ and is threatening not to renew the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty limiting U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear arms.⁴⁰

The Trump administration's attitude toward American stewardship of the global order can be characterized as “no more Mr. Nice Guy.” This view holds that while the United States has been busy propping up the international system and safeguarding the global commons, its friends and adversaries have been taking unfair advantage by encroaching on American markets and free riding on American security guarantees. The time has come, therefore, to renegotiate America's most solemn undertakings, those underpinning both the global trading system and the Western security architecture—and withdraw from them if the United States cannot strike better deals.

The U.S. response to the global coronavirus is symptomatic of this attitude. As Kore Schake writes,

Rather than lead a cooperative international response, Trump has sought to blame the outbreak on China and then on Europe. America's NATO allies were given no warning of the travel ban on their countries. A virtual meeting of the G-7 came at French President Emmanuel Macron's instigation, not at Trump's, even though the United States is chairing that group of the world's leading economies. China's leaders are gleefully running up their score in the great power competition by being generous where we are stingy. Diplomatically, we're not even doing the easy stuff, like broadcasting solidarity with other countries struggling with COVID-19 outbreaks

or congratulating countries that appear to have broken the back of their epidemic.⁴¹

In the early days of the Trump administration, the president's then top national-security and economic advisors, H. R. McMaster and Gary Cohn, went so far as to insist that "the world is not a 'global community,' but an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage."⁴² Consistent with this Hobbesian view of international relations, President Trump has steadily chipped away at the postwar order, starting with its original foundations—the transatlantic and European communities, embodied respectively in NATO and the European Union. He has levied national-security tariffs on America's closest allies, called into question the continued relevance of the transatlantic project, and raised doubts about the durability of the U.S. commitment to Europe's security.⁴³ Reversing decades of American policy, Trump cheered Britain's exit from the European Union and effectively encouraged Germany to do the same when he urged Chancellor Angela Merkel to negotiate a bilateral trade deal with the United States.⁴⁴

Resistance to globalization is by no means limited to the United States. But America's defection will be particularly consequential given that the United States has been the single most important pillar of the current global order. The international system, like any other, is subject to entropy. Left to itself, without continued development, it will erode and eventually disintegrate. Since 1945, the United States was the most significant source of such forward impetus. No other state or group of states has shown the capacity to fill this role. Europe lacks the unity to provide consistent leadership. China might seek to do so, but the more probable effect of waning American leadership is the relaxation of norms, the erosion of institutions, and

a diminution in large-scale cooperative endeavors, efforts to deal collaboratively with pandemic disease and climate change being early casualties.

The Roots of American Antiglobalism

A significant number of Americans have come to feel that the liberal international order is not working for them, that they are not sharing in whatever progress is being registered nationally and globally. And they have a valid point. Over the past several decades, improvements in living standards for most Americans have slowed and, for some, have ceased altogether, dashing the expectations of ever-expanding prosperity set during the 30-year boom that followed World War II.

Income gains since 1980 have been very unevenly distributed among Americans; the top 1 percent has done considerably better than the rest of the country. It is the only group whose income has grown faster than America's per capita gross domestic product. The rest of the top decile, the 91–99 percent, has advanced at the same pace as the economy. The remaining 90 percent of Americans did less well than the country. Their share of the national economy diminished, although most nevertheless registered some absolute gains.⁴⁵

If one looks at accumulated wealth rather than income, the disparity is even starker. Wealth accumulation by the top 0.1 percent of Americans today has reached a level not seen in this country since the "Roaring Twenties" nearly a century ago.⁴⁶ The richest 400 Americans have total assets larger than the bottom 60 percent. In fact, the bottom 50 percent have no wealth at all, because they owe more than they own.⁴⁷

Some economists argue that the situation is not so dire. By including government transfer payments and recent improvement in wages and employment, one can present a more positive picture.⁴⁸ It is also argued that the quality of many goods has improved immeasurably over recent decades even as prices have fallen, consumer electronics being the prime example.

Growing inequality of income and wealth is by no means limited to the United States. According to the United Nations, rising income disparity now affects 70 percent of the world’s population.⁴⁹ But, as Figure 2 shows, the United States is leading the advanced economies in both high income disparity and low social mobility. A

FIGURE 2
More Inequality Associated with Low Intergenerational Mobility



SOURCE: Miles Corak, "Income Inequality, Equality of Opportunity, and Intergenerational Mobility," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2013. Used with permission.

2018 World Economic Forum report found that the United States ranks 23 out of 30 developed nations in its “inclusive development index,” which factors in data on income, health, poverty, and sustainability.⁵⁰ Of all the factors in the index, the United States performed worst in what the World Economic Forum calls the *inclusion* category, which measures the distribution of income and wealth and the level of poverty.

Cultural anxieties also feed antiglobalization, but decades of wage stagnation, increasing income disparity, and declining social mobility go a long way toward explaining the appeal of an “America First” stance that denies the existence of an international community and regards all foreign dealings as narrowly transactional. “For too long,” President Trump asserted in his inaugural address, “a small group in our nation’s Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished—but the people did not share in its wealth.”⁵¹ Trump was addressing his core constituency of those who felt left behind.

After the Pandemic

At first glance, the coronavirus pandemic seems likely to accelerate populist, nationalist, antiestablishment, and antiglobalist trends in the United States and elsewhere. Richard Haass, writing for *Foreign Affairs*, provides a persuasive example of this line of analysis. In an article aptly titled “The Pandemic Will Accelerate History Rather Than Reshape It: Not Every Crisis Is a Turning Point,”⁵² he writes, “The pandemic and the response to it have revealed and reinforced the fundamental characteristics of geopolitics today. As a result, this crisis promises to be less of a

turning point than a way station along the road that the world has been traveling for the past few decades.”

Haass foresees a “post-American world,” noting that long before COVID-19 ravaged the earth, there had already been a precipitous decline in the appeal of the American model. Thanks to persistent political gridlock, gun violence, the mismanagement that led to the 2008 global financial crisis, the opioid epidemic, and more, what America represented grew increasingly unattractive to many. The federal government’s slow, incoherent, and all too often ineffective response to the pandemic will reinforce the already widespread view that the United States has lost its way.

This dystopian vision is all too plausible. The initial response to the pandemic, particularly in the United States, has already exhibited most of the flaws to which Haass refers. These include incoherent policy formulation, ineffectual execution, lack of international collaboration, and blame-shifting toward China and the relevant United Nations body. Both America’s political leadership and its career federal bureaucracy bear responsibility for the slow response to the mounting threat, the former for not taking it seriously enough and the latter for bungling the first efforts at diagnostic testing. As a result, America has become first in the world in the number of COVID-19 known infections and deaths. And the pandemic has highlighted the precarious economic circumstances in which many Americans live. Most workers have no job security and consequently no secure health care. Income disparity has been mirrored in the COVID-19 death rates, because many poorer Americans live and work in crowded environments that preclude social distancing.

The initial American reaction to the coronavirus pandemic has thus validated Richard Haass’ pessimism. American officials have sought to shift the blame to China and the World Health Organization. European governments were given no warning of the travel ban on their countries. France organized a virtual G7 summit meeting to discuss the pandemic, although the United States is this year’s chairman. President Trump announced the suspension of legal immigration to the United States. “Few governments,” Ishaan Tharoor wrote in the *New York Times*, “are even looking to the United States for leadership.”⁵³

Yet as of summer 2020, the pandemic may have a year or more to run, and full economic recovery is more distant still. Congress and the President, in a rare bipartisan effort, have been pumping billions of dollars to provide at least a temporary social safety net under the millions of suddenly unemployed and therefore often uninsured Americans. One must anticipate an effort to extend these arrangements once the virus recedes. Already Democratic politicians are calling for a guaranteed minimum income. And some Republicans have also taken up the issue of income disparity. “The pandemic crisis has laid bare the fact that while our economy was fundamentally strong before the crisis hit, we have unsustainable levels of income disparity in the United States, with too many people living paycheck to paycheck, afraid of the wolf at the door,” writes Henry Paulson, Secretary of the Treasury under George W. Bush.⁵⁴ In the same vein, Marco Rubio, the Republican senator from Florida, asserts that “over the past several decades our political and economic leaders made choices about how to structure society—choosing to prioritize efficiency over resiliency, financial gains over main street investment, individual enrichment over the common good.”⁵⁵

The Great Depression gave rise to the New Deal. The Second World War gave rise to the Marshall Plan. COVID-19 is causing declines in employment and economic activity on a scale comparable to the Great Depression and has already caused a loss of American lives larger than any war since 1945. Might not the pandemic provoke comparably constructive responses? Maybe, as Haass predicts, “the pandemic will accelerate history rather than reshape it,”⁵⁶ but it would be a mistake to act on such an assumption. As of this writing, we have little idea how or when the pandemic will lift, still less when the economy will rebound, nor can we be sure how the blame and credit will be distributed and what conclusions society may draw.

What Can Be Done to Restore American Influence?

Our analysis points to multiple causes for the 21st century decline in American influence. Post-Cold War unipolarity bred hubris, which, when provoked by the attacks of 9/11, resulted in overreach and consequent setbacks. These, in turn, led to geopolitical retrenchment. The 2008 Great Recession fed American disenchantment with international economic policies that produced national and global growth but failed to raise living standards for many Americans. The result has been diminished American interest in advancing broad goals of global peace and prosperity. An America that is no longer seen to be providing global goods, championing universal values, and presenting a societal model to be emulated is left without the capacity to inspire trust and lead by example. Reliant on coercion alone, every advance provokes resentment and builds up resistance to the next demand.

Multiple causes require multiple remedies. To regain the willing collaboration of international partners, U.S. leaders will need to once again integrate American interests with those of the rest of the world. They will need to practice competent statecraft, adopt prudent policies, and pursue realistically achievable objectives. They will need to demonstrate continuity of policy across successive administrations because enduring achievements can rarely be consolidated within a single presidency.

The coronavirus offers the logical starting place for such a turnaround. It is the first global crisis of the 21st century. It is also the first global crisis since 1945 in which the United States has not stepped forward to lead the international response, but there is still time to do so. Nations have begun to deal individually with the health crisis, but they can only dimly foresee the economic and financial crises to come and the consequent political and social fallout. There is still a need for greater international coordination in creating and distributing a vaccine, ensuring more-effective responses to the next pandemic, and preventing a return to the beggar-thy-neighbor trade policies that impoverished everyone after the last great global depression.

American leadership abroad can be sustained only if American leaders retain broad and sufficiently deep public support at home. Poll data indicate that antiglobalization attitudes are most deeply represented in a minority of Americans. A stream of polling over the past half-century conducted by the Chicago Council on International Affairs shows that a clear majority of Americans want the United States to play an active role in world affairs, support America’s alliances, and believe international trade is good for the country. In its 2019

survey, the Council found that seven in ten Americans thought that it would be best for the future of the country to take an active part in world affairs. This level of support is near the highest recorded in the 45-year history of the Chicago Council Survey, although support among millennials was notably weaker than among older generations.⁵⁷ Three-quarters of Americans felt that U.S. military alliances with other countries contribute to U.S. safety, and 87 percent of Americans think international trade is good for the U.S. economy. Only 13 percent thought it bad for the U.S. economy. A majority of Americans believe that trade deals benefit both the United States and its trading partners. This includes majorities of Democrats, Republicans, and independents.⁵⁸

The Council polls measure the extent rather than the intensity of opinions and, thus, tend to underestimate the power of an aroused and organized minority to shape policy in opposition to the more-weakly held preferences of the majority. Recent research from the Center for American Progress (CAP), a progressive think tank linked to the Democratic party, presents a more nuanced and less positive assessment of American public support for global engagement.⁵⁹ The CAP survey found the U.S. electorate divided into four distinct groupings.

One-third of American voters fall into what we label the “Trump nationalist” camp. Composed heavily but not exclusively of Republicans and regular Fox News viewers, this group is strongly in favor of prioritizing military spending and strongly against immigration and the United States acting as the world’s policeman. Balancing this nationalist bloc are two kinds of voters more open to U.S. engagement in the world: “traditional internationalists” and “global activists.” A little less than one-fifth of the electorate, including a mix of Republican

and Democratic, mostly older voters, may be described as “traditional internationalists.” These voters are the strongest believers in international engagement in a general sense and are the most committed to U.S. leadership in the world. Just less than 3 in 10 voters occupy what we call the “global activist” camp, a group that is heavily Democratic, very liberal, and well-educated. This group strongly favors diplomacy over military action and is very supportive of cooperative global actions on issues such as climate change, human rights, and poverty. The final segment of the electorate—a little more than one-fifth—form the “foreign policy disengaged” bloc. Disproportionately younger, less educated, and less attentive to international developments, these voters lack strong opinions on most foreign policy issues and ideas.⁶⁰

The CAP study found that internationalists and globalists combined form a plurality of American voters but not, in contrast to the Chicago Council surveys, a majority. The nationalist group is slightly smaller than the internationalists and globalists combined, while the uninterested and uninformed represent the swing bloc.

This analysis suggests two conclusions regarding the prospects for a renewal of American international influence. First, that more needs to be done to persuade skeptics that working for a more peaceful and more prosperous world is in America’s national as well as their personal interest. Second, that sustained public support for constructive international engagement requires cooperation across party lines. In its absence, successive administrations will reverse the policies and expunge the achievements of their predecessors, ensuring that the United States remains, as it has become, reliably unreliable.

Appendix. America's Enduring Foreign Policy Achievements and Failures 1945–2020

TABLE A.1

Full Annotated List of Achievements and Failures

Administration	Foreign Policy Event	Date	Judgment
Truman	Founding of the United Nations. The Allied nations created a new global organization following World War II to maintain peace and resolve major issues among the Great Powers.	June 1945	+
	Creation of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. These institutions established a framework for economic cooperation and development that would lead to a more stable and more prosperous global economy.	December 1945	+
	Military aid to Turkey and Greece. The first major American move in the Cold War. The United States pledged support for pro-Western governments resisting Communism.	March 1947	+
	Recognition of the state of Israel. The United States was the first country to recognize the state of Israel after it declared its independence.	May 1947	+
	Marshall Plan. A multibillion-dollar aid program credited with rebuilding Europe after World War II.	June 1947	+
	Berlin airlift. The first major confrontation of the Cold War. President Truman ordered an airlift of food and fuel to break the Soviet blockade of Berlin.	June 1948	+
	Creation of NATO. The first peacetime military alliance the United States entered outside of the Western Hemisphere.	April 1949	+
	Creation of West Germany. West Germany acted as a bulwark of the Western alliance in Europe for the next 40 years.	May 1949	+
	Loss of China. The United States failed to mediate the Chinese Civil War. The Nationalist regime fled to Taiwan, and the founding of the People's Republic of China followed.	October 1949	–
	United States enters Korean War. The first military action of the Cold War. The United States failed to deter a North Korean attack but quickly came to the aid of the South.	June 1950	–/+
Neutralization of Taiwan Strait. Truman sent the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait to prevent conflict between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China, effectively putting Taiwan under U.S. protection.	June 1950	+	
Japan Peace Treaty and U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty. Formalized peace between Japan and 48 wartime Allies. Established an alliance between the United States and Japan.	September 1951	+	

TABLE A.1—CONTINUED

Administration	Foreign Policy Event	Date	Judgment
Eisenhower	Armistice ends the Korean War. An uneasy but enduring peace established on the Korean Peninsula.	July 1953	+
	Central Intelligence Agency–backed coup in Iran. Deposed a leftist, democratically elected Iranian leader in favor of a pro-American monarch, contributing to enduring popular anti-Americanism.	August 1953	+/-
	Creation of South Vietnam. U.S. military aid and support helped Ngo Dinh Diem consolidate a non-Communist government in what became South Vietnam, resulting in an eventually costly commitment.	July 1954	+/-
	First Taiwan Strait crisis. As a response to Chinese attacks on Republic of China–held islands, the United States and Taiwan signed a mutual defense treaty.	September 1954	+
	NATO enlargement (West Germany). Marked the final step of West Germany’s integration into the Western defense system.	May 1955	+
	The Suez Crisis. Made clear that the old colonial powers, Great Britain and France, had been supplanted as the world’s preeminent geopolitical forces by the United States.	October 1956	+
	Treaty of Rome. United States supported the creation of the European Community (later the European Union), which became, along with NATO, a cornerstone of European peace and prosperity.	March 1957	+
	Marines to Lebanon. Eisenhower sent marines to Lebanon to prevent pro-Nasser forces from seizing power. The troops stayed three months, suffering only one fatality; U.S. diplomats participated in negotiations through which the Lebanese factions could solve their political conflicts.	July 1958	+
	Second Taiwan Strait crisis. China attacked Republic of China–held islands. Eisenhower sent U.S. forces to the Taiwan Strait.	August 1958	+
Kennedy	U-2 Incident. A U-2 on a covert mission was brought down over the Soviet Union. The United States issued cover statements that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics exposed as lies. Eisenhower refused to apologize to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Paris. The emerging détente between the two countries faded and was replaced by an intensification of the Cold War.	May 1960	–
	Bay of Pigs. A Central Intelligence Agency–financed and trained group of Cuban refugees landed in Cuba and attempted to topple the communist government of Fidel Castro. The attack failed and left Kennedy looking vulnerable and indecisive.	April 1961	–
	Increased advisers and special forces to Vietnam. Kennedy committed the United States to preventing a communist takeover in Vietnam and sent 400 Green Berets there, marking a significant escalation of American involvement in the war.	May 1961	–
	Vienna Summit. Kennedy is unprepared for his first and only meeting with Khrushchev. The leaders failed to negotiate a test ban treaty.	June 1961	–

TABLE A.1—CONTINUED

Administration	Foreign Policy Event	Date	Judgment
Kennedy	Berlin confrontation. The Soviet Union demanded the withdrawal of all armed forces from Berlin. U.S. and Soviet tanks faced off at the inner-city boundary. The crisis culminated with the East German erection of the Berlin Wall.	October 1961	+
	Cuban Missile Crisis. A 13-day political and military standoff over the installation of nuclear-armed Soviet missiles on Cuba. The missiles were withdrawn, and the experience left both the Americans and Soviets sobered by how close the two countries had come to nuclear war.	October 1962	+
	Creation of U.S. Agency for International Development, Peace Corps, Alliance for Progress, Food for Peace. The establishment of several important U.S. soft-power tools.	1961–1962	+
	“Ich bin ein Berliner” speech. Kennedy underlined enduring U.S. support for West Berlin in the wake of the construction of the Berlin Wall.	June 1963	+
	Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. An agreement with the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union to forbid the testing of nuclear weapons in space, underwater, and in the Earth’s atmosphere.	August 1963	+
Johnson	Gulf of Tonkin incident and deployment of U.S. troops to Vietnam. Two apparent attacks on U.S. warships, the second of which never actually occurred, led Johnson to seek Congressional authorization for an expansion of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam conflict.	August 1964	–
	Marines to the Dominican Republic. In an effort to forestall what he believed would be a communist dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, Johnson sent U.S. troops to restore order in the island nation. The action provoked loud protests in Latin America and skepticism among Congress and the public.	April 1965	/
	Conclusion of the Kennedy Round. These global trade talks led to a reduction in tariffs and other trade barriers.	June 1967	+
	Outer Space Treaty. Banned the stationing of weapons of mass destruction in outer space, prohibited military activities on celestial bodies, and detailed legally binding rules governing the peaceful exploration and use of space. Represents the basic legal framework of international space law.	October 1967	+
	Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Multilateral agreement to forestall the spread of nuclear weapons and technology.	July 1968	+
Nixon	Invasion of Cambodia. Nixon authorized covert bombings and a U.S. incursion into Cambodia to cut North Vietnamese supply lines to the South. The incursion angered the American public and members of Congress, who accused Nixon of having widened the war illegally.	March 1969	–
	Opening to China. Nixon’s visit was a first and decisive step in the budding rapprochement between the two nations.	February 1972	+

TABLE A.1—CONTINUED

Administration	Foreign Policy Event	Date	Judgment
Nixon	Biological Weapons Convention. Banned the production of an entire category of weapons.	April 1972	+
	Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) I and Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. SALT I produced both the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which limited strategic missile defense interceptors, and an agreement that capped U.S. and Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles.	May 1972	+
	Vietnam peace agreement. Established a ceasefire and concluded America's direct military participation in the Vietnam war. The United States withdrew, but other provisions were not observed.	January 1973	+/-
	U.S. support for counter-Allende coup in Chile. Replaced a leftist, democratically elected leader with the more pro-Western but repressive dictator.	September 1973	+/-
	Yom Kippur War and Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy. Egyptian and Syrian forces launched a surprise attack on Israel. The United States resupplied Israel, deterred a Soviet intervention, and engaged in intense regional diplomacy. The Arab oil embargo created considerable economic disruption.	October 1973	+
Ford	Fall of South Vietnam. North Vietnam invaded the South, Congress cut off American aid, the South collapsed, millions of refugees fled.	April 1975	-
	Helsinki Final Act. Consolidated détente in Europe and became a rallying point for human rights in Eastern Europe.	August 1975	+
	First annual G6 (later G7 and G8) Summit at Rambouillet. Leaders met in response to a global spike in oil prices and the subsequent financial turmoil; these summits have evolved into a forum for the world's most advanced economies to discuss matters of mutual interest.	November 1975	+
Carter	Panama Canal Treaties. Transferred control of the Panama Canal to Panama, removing an irritant to U.S. hemispheric relations and assuring continued access to this global waterway.	August 1977	+
	Diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan Relations Act. The United States recognized the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China. The United States also passed the Taiwan Relations Act, which provided a framework for continued relations with Taiwan in the absence of official diplomatic ties.	January 1979	+
	Camp David Accords. Established a framework for the peace treaty concluded between Israel and Egypt.	March 1979	+
	Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty II. Provided for broad limits on strategic offensive weapons systems; never ratified but effectively observed.	June 1979	+

TABLE A.1—CONTINUED

Administration	Foreign Policy Event	Date	Judgment
Carter	Aid to Afghan mujahidin. Carter authorized lethal and nonlethal aid to the mujahidin after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. That resistance eventually forced their withdrawal.	July 1979	+
	NATO Double-Track Decision. The Soviet Union deployed SS-20 intermediate-range missiles targeting Europe. NATO adopted the dual-track decision to deploy intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe and to negotiate mutual limitations.	December 1979	+
	Fall of the Shah and the Iranian hostage crisis. The overthrow of the Shah led to an attack on the American embassy and the seizure of 52 Americans, held for 444 days. The crisis had an enduring negative impact on U.S.-Iran relations and regional stability.	January 1979– January 1981	–
Reagan	NATO enlargement (Spain). The last dictatorship in Western Europe fell, and NATO added a democracy.	May 1982	+
	Marine barracks bombing/U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon. Hezbollah killed 241 marines in Lebanon on a peacekeeping mission, resulting in a hasty withdrawal.	August 1982	–
	Invasion of Grenada. Citing the threat posed to American nationals in Grenada by that island’s Marxist regime, Reagan ordered a military intervention that led to a rapid regime change and early U.S. withdrawal.	October 1983	+
	Plaza Accord. Signed between the United States and France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Japan, ended the overvaluation of the U.S. dollar. The most effective example of coordinated exchange rate policy in the post-Bretton Woods period.	September 1985	+
	Bombing of Libya. Reagan authorized air strikes against Libya in retaliation for a terrorist bombing in West Berlin.	April 1986	+
	Iran-Contra Affair. U.S. officials initiated a clandestine sale of U.S. military equipment to Iran in exchange for hostages held in Lebanon. The proceeds from the sale were illegally funneled to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua. The Secretary of Defense and the National Security Advisor received felony convictions.	August 1985– March 1987	–
	“Mr. Gorbachev, Tear Down This Wall” speech. The speech, delivered about 100 yards from the Berlin Wall, was a bold challenge to Gorbachev to prove he was serious about reforming Soviet government policies.	June 1987	+
	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Provided for the elimination of all Soviet and American intermediate-range nuclear weapons.	December 1987	+
	Military buildup/Strategic Defense Initiative leading to U.S.-USSR arms control negotiation. Reagan’s massive military buildup drew the Soviets into an arms race they could not afford, leading to successful arms control talks.	1982–1987	+
Bush 41	Panama Intervention (Operation Just Cause). The largest American military action since the Vietnam War ousted Manuel Noriega from power, sent him to federal prison for drug smuggling, and restored democratic government.	December 1989	+
	Chemical Weapons Convention. Banned the production of chemical weapons and required the destruction of chemical weapon stockpiles.	June 1990	+

TABLE A.1—CONTINUED

Administration	Foreign Policy Event	Date	Judgment
Bush 41	Reunification of Germany. Bush worked with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl to achieve the peaceful reunification of Germany within NATO.	September 1990	+
	Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty. Established limits on size and location of conventional forces throughout Europe.	November 1990	+
	First Gulf War. The United States led an international coalition to eject Iraqi forces and liberate Kuwait.	January 1991	+
	Strategic Arms Reduction (START) Treaty. Reduced U.S. and Soviet nuclear arsenals by one-third.	July 1990	+
	Madrid Peace Conference. The United States, together with the Soviet Union and Spain, cosponsored a conference in Madrid to advance Middle East peace.	October 1991	+
	Cooperative Threat Reduction Program. Secured and dismantled weapons of mass destruction and their associated infrastructure in the non-Russian states of the former Soviet Union.	December 1991	+
Clinton	The North American Free Trade Agreement. Created a free-trade bloc among the three major countries of North America.	January 1994	+
	Black Hawk Down and U.S. withdrawal from Somalia. Started as a humanitarian mission under Bush, morphed under Clinton into a nation-building operation for which the United States and United Nations were ill-prepared. Clinton withdrew U.S. forces after 18 of them were killed in a Mogadishu firefight.	October 1993– March 1994	–
	Rwandan Genocide. The United States failed to help organize an effective international effort to halt genocide in Rwanda.	April 1994	–
	Conclusion of the Uruguay Round and establishment of World Trade Organization (WTO). Negotiated under Bush 41 but completed under Clinton. Cut industrial tariffs by one-third, curtailed agricultural protection, and established binding dispute settlement procedures. The WTO strengthened and supplanted the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade system.	April 1994	+
	Intervention in Haiti. Restored a democratically elected president to power, but the effect was not lasting. A second international intervention was necessary a decade later.	October 1994	/
	North Korea Agreed Framework. The first nuclear agreement with North Korea, whereby the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) agreed to halt plutonium production and freeze its nuclear program. The Bush administration later withdrew the United States from the agreement after discovering North Korea had a covert uranium enrichment program.	October 1994	/

TABLE A.1—CONTINUED

Administration	Foreign Policy Event	Date	Judgment
Clinton	Oslo Peace Accords and Jordan-Israel peace treaty. The Palestine Liberation Organization recognized the state of Israel, and Israel, in turn, allowed the Palestinians limited self-governance in Gaza and the West Bank. The Jordan-Israel peace treaty terminated the state of war between Israel and Jordan. The Jordan-Israel peace has endured, but the Oslo accords have not led toward a further resolution of Israeli-Palestinian differences.	September 1993– September 1995	+
	Dayton Peace Agreement and end of Bosnian Civil War. Ended the fighting between Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia. NATO sent a peacekeeping force to enforce its provisions.	December 1995	+
	Kyoto Protocol on climate change. Clinton signed the first international treaty to require countries to control and reduce greenhouse gases. The treaty is not ratified by Congress; later, the Bush administration withdrew.	November 1998	/
	Kosovo air war and Serbian withdrawal. NATO initiated a bombing campaign to end Serbian repression of ethnic Albanians. NATO peacekeepers replaced departing Serbian forces.	March 1999	+
	NATO Enlargement (Poland, Hungary, Czechia). The first NATO expansion to include former Soviet bloc members.	March 1999	+
	Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement. The United States helped broker peace in Northern Ireland.	December 1999	+
	Plan Colombia. A \$3 billion military aid package to Colombia, widely credited with increasing the Colombian government's capacity to limit and eventually negotiate an end to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia insurgency.	August 2000	+
Bush 43	United States withdraws from the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. Bush announced the United States would not implement the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, citing the agreement's impact on the economy and undue burden on the United States and other developed countries.	March 2001	–
	9/11 and the Afghan invasion. The United States failed to prevent a devastating surprise attack, responded with a rapid and successful military operation in Afghanistan, but failed to stabilize the country, leading to a prolonged counterinsurgency campaign.	September 2001	–/+/–
	Abrogation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Bush withdrew the United States from this treaty in order to build as yet unproven antimissile defenses.	June 2002	/
	Iraq War. The United States invaded Iraq on the basis of faulty intelligence, overthrew Saddam but failed to secure the country, and further destabilized the entire region.	March 2003	–
	President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief anti-HIV initiative. A U.S. initiative to address the AIDS crisis in Africa.	May 2003	+

TABLE A.1—CONTINUED

Administration	Foreign Policy Event	Date	Judgment
Bush 43	Civil nuclear cooperation agreement with India. Ended a decades-long moratorium on U.S. sales of nuclear fuel and reactor components in exchange for India separating its civilian and military nuclear programs. The agreement opened the possibility of closer relations with a potential counterweight to China.	March 2006	+
	Russia and then NATO Suspend the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty. Russia largely suspended implementation of the CFE Treaty in 2007. There were failed efforts in the Obama administration to resolve the dispute; in 2011, the United States and NATO allies ceased carrying out certain obligations as well.	December 2007	–
Obama	New START. Cut U.S. and Russian deployed strategic nuclear systems by one-third. The Trump administration may let this treaty lapse.	February 2011	+
	NATO intervention in Libya. A NATO-led, UN-approved coalition air campaign protected civilians and led to Muammar Qadhafi's overthrow, but there was little follow-through, and the country again fell into civil war.	March 2011	+/-
	Syrian civil war. The United States failed to halt or even positively affect the course of Syria's long-running conflict.	August 2012	–
	Ottawa Treaty (the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention). The United States signed but has not ratified the treaty banning land mines, with an exception carved out for the Korean Peninsula. Trump has further derogated from the treaty's limitations.	May 2014	/
	Iran Nuclear Agreement. An agreement between Iran and the United States, United Kingdom, France, China, Russia, and Germany in which Iran agreed to limit its sensitive nuclear activities and allow in international inspectors in return for the lifting of some economic sanctions. The Trump administration later withdrew from the arrangement.	July 2015	/
	Diplomatic normalization with Cuba. Obama ordered the restoration of full diplomatic relations with Cuba. The Trump administration later reversed most efforts to open American contacts with Cuba.	July 2015	/
	Trans-Pacific Partnership. Obama concluded negotiations for the world's largest free-trade area. The agreement was never submitted to Congress, and the Trump administration later withdrew from the arrangement.	February 2016	/
	Paris Climate Accord. Adopted by nearly every nation to address climate change. The Trump administration later announced its intent to withdraw the United States from the accord.	November 2016	/
Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) campaign. The United States withdrawal from Iraq and the Syrian civil war allowed Al Qaeda in Iraq to reconstitute itself as the Islamic State and march to the gates of Baghdad. U.S. forces returned to Iraq and helped push back the Islamic State incursion.	August 2014– January 2017	-/+	

TABLE A.1—CONTINUED

Administration	Foreign Policy Event	Date	Judgment
Trump	Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) withdrawal. The remaining TPP countries proceeded without the United States, China gained support for its own regional free-trade area, which is to include all of America's regional allies.	January 2017	–
	Paris Climate Accord withdrawal. President Trump initiated steps to withdraw the United States.	January 2017	–
	Fall of Raqqa/end of Islamic State caliphate. Trump successfully concluded the campaign to eliminate Islamic State territorial holdings in Iraq and Syria.	October 2017	+
	Iran deal withdrawal. The United States withdrew from the Iran deal and reimposed economic sanctions on Iran.	May 2018	?
	Trade war with China. The United States applied tariffs to a range of Chinese goods in an effort to improve trade balance and curb unfair Chinese trade practices. China responded in kind.	July 2018	?
	New North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). A modest improvement on NAFTA, mostly adding new levels of protection.	June 2019	/
	Pull back of U.S. troops from Eastern Syria. Trump ordered a pullback of U.S. forces, opening the way for a Turkish attack on America's Kurdish allies, an expansion of Russian influence, and the potential resurgence of ISIS.	October 2019	–
	Blocking of WTO dispute mechanism. The United States began blocking all new appointments to the WTO's dispute resolution court, which prevents the court from issuing binding rulings.	December 2019	–
	Lifting of the land mine ban. The Trump administration lifted a ban on the U.S. military's use of anti-personnel land mines outside of the Korean Peninsula.	January 2020	–
U.S.-Taliban agreement. The United States and the Taliban signed a preliminary agreement providing a timetable for U.S. withdrawal and intra-Afghan talks.	March 2020	?	
Nuclear Diplomacy with DPRK. Trump and DPRK leader Kim Jong Un held three personal meetings to discuss denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula, so far to no effect.	March 2018–present	?	

TABLE A.2
Results by Administration and by Decade

Administration	+
Truman	11
Eisenhower	7
Kennedy	5
Johnson	3
Nixon	4
Ford	2
Carter	6
Reagan	7
Bush 41	8
Clinton	8
Bush 43	2
Obama	2
Trump	1
Decade	+
1945–1949	8
1950s	10
1960s	8
1970s	12
1980s	8
1990s	15
2000s	2
2010s	3

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About This Perspective

The authors trace the decline of America's international influence over the past two decades, explore reasons for this decline, and suggest ways in which it might be reversed. We conclude that post-Cold War unipolarity bred hubris that, when provoked by the attacks of September 11, 2001, resulted in overreach and consequent setbacks. These, in turn, led to geopolitical retrenchment. The 2008 Great Recession fed American disenchantment with international economic policies that produced national and global growth but failed to raise living standards for many Americans. To regain the willing collaboration of international partners, U.S. leaders will need to once again align American interests with those of the rest of the world, practice competent statecraft, adopt prudent policies, pursue realistically achievable objectives, and demonstrate continuity of policy across successive administrations.

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