Is the United States relinquishing its global supremacy?

By Bill Wanlund

At an annual security conference of the United States’ European allies in February, a gathering that normally celebrates trans-Atlantic unity, German Chancellor Angela Merkel delivered a harsh assessment of U.S. foreign policy.

Merkel criticized the Trump administration’s unilateral approach to international affairs, specifically questioning U.S. plans to pull troops out of Syria and Afghanistan and a decision to abandon the 31-year-old intermediate-range nuclear weapons treaty with Russia. Both actions, she said, would endanger Europe while strengthening Moscow’s position.

The liberal world order—the U.S.-led system of institutions and alliances created after World War II and credited with establishing postwar global peace and prosperity—“has collapsed into many tiny parts,” Merkel said.¹

Attendees gave the German leader a standing ovation, in contrast to the cool reception that met Vice President Mike Pence hours later when he extended greetings from Trump. In that speech, Pence defended the administration’s foreign policy, saying that under President Trump, “America is leading the free world once again.” Pence also urged Europeans to “do more” in their own defense and “stop undermining” U.S. sanctions against Iran by joining the U.S.
withdrawal from a 2015 agreement to halt Iran’s development of nuclear weapons.\(^2\)

Trump is changing the U.S. role on the global stage. Unlike his postwar predecessors, who tended to promote U.S.-style democracy and other values overseas through multinational alliances and agreements, Trump prefers fewer international commitments and a foreign policy focused on protecting U.S. jobs and interests.

The president’s supporters say America’s largesse has reached its limit and that the United States should use its economic and political might to its advantage. Trump’s critics say the United States is withdrawing from global leadership, which they argue means a decline of democracy, a return to cutthroat international economic competition and a heightened threat of conflict. The debate has led to a re-evaluation of U.S. priorities and the nation’s place in the world.

Trump has vowed to extract the United States from what he views as economically harmful international agreements and limits on U.S. sovereignty. “From this moment on, it’s going to be America First,” he said in his inaugural address. “We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world—but it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first.”\(^3\)

Henry Nau, a professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University, agrees that U.S. foreign policy has needed adjusting. “Trump clearly was elected to pull back our responsibilities around the world,” he says. “The country has been in that mood for the last 10 years at least.”

A recent survey by the Eurasia Group Foundation, a New York City research organization, supports Nau’s view, identifying a “public desire for a more restrained U.S. foreign policy.” Only 18 percent of respondents agreed that “promoting and defending democracy around the world” is the best way to help sustain global peace, while 34 percent said the path to peace means focusing on “domestic needs and the health of American democracy.”\(^4\)

Trump’s worldview appears to coincide with the 34 percent, according to Thomas Shannon, who retired last year as undersecretary of State for political affairs, the State Department’s highest position for a career diplomat. “Trump believes we live in a dangerous, complicated world in which America has carried a huge security burden, and a large economic burden in managing the world trading system,” says Shannon, now senior international policy adviser for the Washington law firm Arnold & Porter. “He thinks that over time this has disadvantaged the U.S., and that even allies and partners have taken advantage of this relationship for their own benefit.”

To correct that perceived imbalance, Trump has, among other things:

- Pulled out of three international agreements signed by President Barack Obama: the Paris climate agreement aimed at limiting planet-warming carbon emissions; the 2015 treaty to limit Iran’s nuclear weapons; and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a free-trade agreement, which had covered 12 Pacific region nations.
- Questioned how fairly the United States has been treated by international organizations such as the 70-year-old North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military alliance.
• Initiated a series of trade disputes with China.
• Renegotiated a trade agreement among the United States, Canada and Mexico.
• Aggressively tried to limit U.S. immigration, both legal and illegal.
• Withdrawn from the agreement to ban land-based intermediate-range missiles, originally signed in 1987 by President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

Critics of the administration worry about the long-term impact of Trump’s embrace of anti-immigrant populist leaders in Eastern Europe and Italy who question the value of the European Union and his praise for dictators with questionable human rights records—such as Russian President Vladimir Putin and the leaders of Egypt, Brazil, the Philippines and Saudi Arabia.

For instance, shortly after his inauguration President Trump traveled to Saudi Arabia—his first overseas trip as president—and a year later welcomed Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to the White House. In both instances, Trump hailed the kingdom’s help in fighting terrorism and the thousands of American jobs that would be created by Saudi Arabia’s

U.S. Abandons Key International Agreements

President Trump has begun or concluded withdrawal from five major treaties and agreements, involving climate change, trade and nuclear arms. In addition, Trump, who during his presidential campaign threatened to withdraw from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), negotiated a revised version of the pact, now called the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), which awaits congressional approval.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreement/Treaty</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Status</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate-RANGE Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty</td>
<td>Established 1987; required the U.S. and Soviet Union to destroy all land-based missiles with ranges between 300 and 3,400 miles. U.S. obligations suspended in February, with formal withdrawal in six months. The U.S. and Russia have accused each other of violating the treaty.</td>
<td>Withdrawing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)</td>
<td>Established 1994 among the U.S., Canada and Mexico; eliminated tariffs and other restrictions among the three countries. The Trump administration has negotiated a new version, the USMCA, which the White House says provides more advantages for the U.S. workforce and economy.</td>
<td>Renegotiated; awaiting congressional approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Iran nuclear deal)</td>
<td>Agreement reached July 2015 among Iran, the U.S., the U.K., France, China, Russia and Germany; limited Iran’s nuclear program development and allowed international inspections in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions. In May 2018 Trump announced that the U.S. was withdrawing from the deal and reinstated U.S. sanctions against Iran.</td>
<td>Withdrawn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paris Agreement on Climate Change</td>
<td>Adopted December 2015 by 195 countries; set universal goals on limiting climate-warming emissions. Trump said the agreement put the U.S. at a disadvantage. The agreement prevents official withdrawal until 2020.</td>
<td>Withdrawn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)</td>
<td>Established 2016 by 12 countries bordering the Pacific Ocean; designed to reduce tariffs and foster free trade and economic growth among members. Trump said the agreement is unfair to U.S. workers. The remaining 11 countries have moved forward with the deal, renaming it the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.</td>
<td>Withdrawn</td>
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large purchases of U.S. military equipment, but did not mention the kingdom’s poor human rights record.

“Saudi Arabia is a very wealthy nation, and they’re going to give the United States some of that wealth, hopefully, in the form of jobs, in the form of the purchase of the finest military equipment anywhere in the world,” he told reporters during Salman’s White House visit.5

Trump’s actions and policies could spell the end of the economic and social progress enjoyed by most of the world since 1945, says Robert Kagan, a senior fellow at the centrist Brookings Institution think tank, who has served as a foreign policy adviser in Republican administrations. “I fear we will find ourselves where we were between the world wars, where no one is keeping the order and everything fell apart,” says Kagan, author of *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World.*

Others disagree. “The [U.S.] economy is booming, the military is rapidly recovering from 15 years of overextension, and the Trump administration is concluding trade deals in record time,” wrote Salvatore Babones, an American associate professor of sociology and social policy at the University of Sydney in Australia.6

Meanwhile, foreign public approval of the United States has “plummeted” since Trump’s election, according to the Pew Research Center’s 2018 Global Attitudes Survey. It found “widespread opposition to [Trump’s] policies and a widely shared lack of confidence in his leadership.” Seventy percent of respondents in 25 countries said they had “no confidence” in Trump’s leadership, compared to 27 percent who said they did.7

“People generally aren’t interested in seeing the U.S. disengage, or wall itself off from the rest of the world,” says Richard Wike, Pew’s director of global attitudes research.

James Poulos, executive editor of *The American Mind,* an online publication of the conservative Claremont Institute think tank in Upland, Calif., says a poor global image “is obviously not what you want to achieve in your foreign policy, but you do have to put the prosperity and security of America at the top of your priorities list.”

The ranks of professional diplomats have thinned under Trump, who says he prefers to rely on his own instincts and one-on-one rapport rather than experts when dealing with foreign leaders. “I talk to a lot of people . . . but my primary [foreign policy] consultant is myself, and I have a good instinct for this stuff,” Trump said during the 2016 campaign.5

The State Department lost 60 percent of its career ambassadors during the first 11 months of the Trump administration, and 59 of the nation’s 188 ambassadorships remained unfilled as of March, according to the American Foreign Service Association, a professional organization representing diplomats. In comparison, in February 2011, two years into the Obama administration, 14 of 173 ambassadorships were vacant.9

“No national security institution can withstand the unprecedented loss of highly skilled senior officers . . . without weakening America’s capacity to lead globally,” says the association’s president, Barbara Stephenson. She blamed Trump’s first secretary of State, former ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson, who slashed the department’s budget, eliminated many positions and halved promotion rates.10

Besides diminishing U.S. influence, the administration has “hollowed out American diplomacy and only deepened the divisions among Americans about our global role” at a time when the international landscape is shifting, wrote former Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns in his new book, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for its Renewal.*

“The United States is no longer the only big kid on the geopolitical block,” Burns, now president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said on CBS News’ “Face the Nation.” “It’s a moment when diplomacy, when
our alliances, our capacity for building coalitions—what sets us apart from lonelier powers like China or Russia—is more important than ever. And my concern is that we are squandering those assets right now.”

But Randall Schweller, director of the Program for the Study of Realist Foreign Policy at Ohio State University, said, “Trump is merely shedding shibboleths and seeing international politics for what it is: . . . a highly competitive realm populated by self-interested states concerned with their own security and economic welfare.”

Trump’s foreign policy, he said, “seeks to promote the interests of the United States above all [and] has given the lie to the notion that many of the institutions of the postwar order actually bind the United States, and he has walked away from them accordingly.”

As Trump pursues his “America First” approach to foreign policy and U.S. citizens sort out their views on the direction of that policy, here are some of the questions being asked:

Is the United States relinquishing its global supremacy?

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in 1991, the United States has enjoyed pre-eminence as the world’s superpower—“the indispensable nation,” as former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright described it.

But some historians and foreign policy experts say the Trump administration has undercut U.S. global supremacy by withdrawing from the nation’s leadership role in multilateral organizations and agreements, opening a power vacuum that authoritarian countries such as China and Russia will fill.

The president has been “demolishing,” one by one, “the essential pillars of U.S. global power that have sustained Washington’s hegemony for the past 70 years,” said Alfred McCoy, a history professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and author of In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of U.S. Global Power. Trump has done that, McCoy said, by weakening post-World War II alliances such as NATO and “withdrawing the United States, almost willfully, from its international leadership, most spectacularly with the Paris climate accord but also very importantly with the Trans-Pacific Partnership.”

In 2018, McCoy said that by relying on his “strikingly inept version of one-man diplomacy” and favoring “narrow national interest over international leadership,” Trump had undercut the U.S. strategic position at a time when China was pushing relentlessly to dominate the vast Eurasian continent.

But Babones, at the University of Sydney, praised Trump’s foreign policy moves. “Trump has [delivered] an as-yet-uninterrupted string of foreign-policy successes,” he wrote. North Korea “hasn’t launched a rocket in 10 months; America’s NATO allies are finally starting to . . . increase defense spending; . . . and the U.S. embassy in Israel moved to Jerusalem in May without sparking the Third Intifada predicted by Trump’s opponents.”

Other scholars say the days of U.S. dominance were waning long before Trump was elected. Canadian political scientist Robert Muggah, for instance,

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China Seen as Growing U.S. Rival

More than two-thirds of respondents say China plays a more important role in the world than it did a decade ago, according to a 2018 survey conducted across 25 countries. But a plurality still calls the United States the world’s leading economic power, and a substantial majority prefers U.S. leadership.

### Median Global Opinion on Balance of Power Between the U.S. and China, 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>China</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who plays a more important role in the world today, compared to 10 years ago?</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is the world’s leading economic power?</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who would be better for the world to have as the leading power?</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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* Numbers for first finding equal more than 100 percent because separate questions were asked for each country.

predicted in 2016 that by 2030 there would be “no single hegemonic force” overseeing international peace, but rather a handful of countries—such as the United States, Russia, China, Germany, India and Japan—exhibiting “semi-imperial tendencies.” This broadening of global power has been caused in part by “a vicious backlash against globalization” triggered by the 2008 worldwide financial crisis, said Muggah, co-founder of the Igarape Institute, a nonpartisan research organization in Rio de Janeiro.18

This redistribution of power is “profoundly disrupting the global order,” Muggah said. The United States and the European Union are ceding influence to China and India, whose economies are growing more rapidly, and postwar alliances are yielding to new regional coalitions, he wrote. Muggah added, “While these reconfigurations reflect regional political, economic and demographic shifts, they also increase the risk of volatility, including war.”19

Brookings’ Kagan says that if the United States withdraws from its role as an indispensable nation, conflicts will result thousands of miles away. “We will find ourselves, as we did in the world wars, economically affected by these conflicts and then sucked into them.”

Gordon Adams, a professor emeritus at the American University School of International Service, said the United States is not relinquishing its global supremacy; rather, the world is undergoing an inevitable post-World War II and post-Cold War rebalancing of power.

“The power of other countries has grown, giving them both the ability and the desire to affect global affairs independently of U.S. desires,” Adams wrote last June. “This global trend spells the end of the ‘exceptional nation’ Americans imagined they were since the nation was founded and the end of the American era of global domination that began 70 years ago.”20

But in an interview Adams says the fears of a U.S. decline are exaggerated. “Everybody focuses on China and says the U.S. is declining, but it isn’t about declining,” he says. “It’s about a shift in the power balance.”

Tufts University assistant professor of political science Michael Beckley believes the United States is not about to be pushed off its perch. In his 2018 book, Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World’s Sole Superpower, Beckley wrote that the United States “will remain the world’s only superpower for many decades, and probably throughout this century,” because of its economic and military advantages.21

China, America’s most powerful economic competitor for global pre-eminence, he said, has an inefficient economy that “is barely keeping pace” as its wealth is eroded by “the burden of propping up loss-making companies and feeding, policing, protecting and cleaning up” after its 1.4 billion people. By contrast, the United States “is big and efficient, producing high output at relatively low costs” with much lower welfare and security costs but five to 10 times the military capabilities of China, Beckley wrote.22

Russia, meanwhile, wants to expand its influence beyond Eastern Europe but is likely to remain only a regional power, Beckley says in an interview, because its military and economic strength is much weaker than that of the United States. “The U.S. holds all the high cards, [with] the best fundamentals for being able to amass wealth and military power in the decades ahead,” he says.

Is President Trump playing into Vladimir Putin’s hands?

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, every U.S. president has vowed to ease tensions between Russia and the United States.23

“The post-Cold War era has been punctuated by high-profile attempts to reset the relationship,” says Alexander Cooley, director of the Harriman Institute for the Study of Russia, Eurasia and Eastern Europe at Columbia University. But those efforts have tended to fail, he says, “because they don’t get at the structural sources of U.S.-Russian discord”—Russia’s desire to control the former Soviet states and satellites of Central and Eastern Europe where the United States has been promoting democratic reforms.

President Trump has said that he and Russian President Vladimir Putin would “end up having an extraordinary relationship. Getting along with Russia is a good thing, not a bad thing.”24

But Trump’s critics say he has a puzzling history of soft-pedaling criticism of Putin, despite a string of apparent provocations, including Russia’s interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, its 2014 incursion into Ukraine and its support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whom the United States opposes in that country’s civil war.
The CIA, FBI and National Security Agency unanimously concluded with “high confidence” that the Russians interfered in the 2016 presidential election to aid Trump’s candidacy. But after a private, two-hour meeting with Putin in Helsinki in 2018, Trump stunned U.S. intelligence officials by saying he didn’t see “any reason” that Russia would have meddled in the elections and was inclined to believe Putin’s “extremely strong and powerful . . . denial” of such activity.25

Many Republican and Democratic leaders were astounded. “No prior president has ever abased himself more abjectly before a tyrant,” said the late Republican Sen. John McCain of Arizona.26 (Trump later said he “misspoke” and that he had meant to say he saw no reason Russia “wouldn’t” have interfered in the elections.27)

Trump also has likened America’s conduct to Russia’s with regard to political assassinations. In February 2017, for instance, he appeared to excuse allegations that Putin has had political opponents and journalists assassinated, saying, “There are a lot of killers. You think our country’s so innocent?”28

Vladimir Frolov, a Russian foreign affairs analyst, has called Trump “God’s gift that keeps on giving.” He added: “Trump implements Russia’s negative agenda by default, undermining the U.S.-led world order, U.S. alliances, U.S. credibility as a partner and an ally. . . . Russia can just relax and watch and root for Trump, which Putin does at every TV appearance.”29

But George Washington University’s Nau says that despite Trump’s friendly words about Putin, the administration’s actions toward Russia have been tough, such as endorsing the placement of NATO forces, including U.S. troops, in Poland and the Baltic states, on Russia’s borders. “How’s that coddling Russia?” Nau asks. “And he’s given lethal weapons to the Kiev government in Ukraine, a big step Obama never would have taken.”

Trump supporters also point out that the administration continues to enforce sanctions against Russia for its 2014 invasion of Ukraine and its cybercrime-related activities, human rights violations, weapons proliferation, support for Syria, trade with North Korea and terrorism-related activities.30

“Trump is dealing with Russia in the right way,” says James Carafano, director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. “Trump is consistently saying to Putin, ‘I’m here to safeguard American interests.’”

But critics point out that Trump did not stand up to Russia until March 2018, after Congress pressured him to use the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, which Congress had passed in August 2017. Trump had signed the legislation reluctantly, complaining that it “improperly encroaches on executive power.”31

Some of Trump’s critics have asked whether the president’s business interests in Russia—including a proposal to build a Trump Tower in Moscow—have affected his approach to Putin, something the president has repeatedly denied.32 But Trump’s former attorney, Michael Cohen, told the House Oversight Committee Feb. 27 that Trump “knew of and directed the Trump Moscow negotiations throughout the campaign, and lied about it . . . because he stood to make hundreds of millions of dollars on the project.”33

Stephen Sestanovich, a professor of international diplomacy at Columbia University and a former State Department official, said, “We can’t rule out the more sinister and sordid explanations of [the Trump-Putin] ‘bromance.’” But some explanations for the mutual attraction are not mysterious, he said. “Putin’s got this record as a bad-boy statesman that puts him outside the bounds of polite society in Europe and America. Trump admires that.”34

Are post-World War II alliances and structures suited for today’s foreign policy challenges?

Some foreign policy experts say that, with notable exceptions, the world has enjoyed 70 years of relative peace and prosperity, due largely to international political, economic and military structures and alliances established after World War II by U.S. and other Western leaders. The goal of the liberal international order was to prevent the Soviet Union from expanding communism into other countries and to promote democracy, human rights and free-market economies.

The international order was defended by NATO—a military alliance established in 1949 that now has 29 member countries—and was implemented through economic rules and standards of behavior established by the United Nations (U.N.), World Bank, International Monetary Fund and General Agreement on Tariffs and
Trade (GATT)—the predecessor of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Many historians say the U.S. architects of those institutions felt it was in the nation’s long-term interest to surrender some sovereignty to advance global harmony. Without such institutions, they say, the world would revert to the chaotic political rivalries and unregulated trade practices that twice led to global war.

The institutions enable national leaders “to better manage the kind of conflicts that would otherwise have spun up into wars,” says E. Anthony Wayne, former assistant secretary of State for economic and business affairs. Abandoning them, he says, means “the world becomes more like a jungle.”

But since the fall of the Soviet Union, some foreign policy experts have questioned whether these institutions should be scrapped, or at least retooled, to deal with modern problems such as terrorism, climate change, religious and ethnic conflicts and migration.

“The world has changed in profound ways over the last several decades, and . . . our alliance structures were built for another time,” says former diplomat Shannon. “Although they’re still useful, we are rethinking the world and America’s purpose in it, a discussion which the president, in his own way, is driving by his behavior.”

Indeed, Trump’s skepticism about NATO has led some Europeans to wonder whether Europe should start looking after its own security needs. French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Merkel have called for consideration of a military force run by the 28-member European Union. “The days where we can unconditionally rely on others are gone,” Merkel said.35

Trump also has criticized the WTO, which sets rules and adjudicates international trade disputes. In October 2017 he complained that the organization “was set up for the benefit of everybody but us. . . . [W]e lose . . . almost all of the lawsuits.” 39 He threatened to withdraw the United States from the 164-member body “if they don’t shape up.”40

But Dan Ikenson, director of the libertarian Cato Institute’s Herbert A. Stiefel Center for Trade Policy Studies, has studied WTO trade disputes in which the United States was either the complainant or the defendant. “There is no anti-American bias” in the WTO’s Dispute Settlement Body, he said. The United States won 91 percent of the 114 complaints it filed with the WTO from 1995 to March 2017, a higher success rate than of any other country, he found, and lost in 89 percent of the 129 cases filed against it.41

Dennis Shea, U.S. ambassador to the WTO, has said certain outdated WTO procedures should be reformed, including rules that allow China to protect its domestic industries while “creating disadvantages for foreign companies.”

In addition, two-thirds of WTO members—including China, Saudi Arabia, Brunei and Qatar—are allowed to claim special privileges because they classify themselves as developing countries. On Feb. 15, Shea proposed that the WTO withhold special treatment from countries classified as “high income” by the World Bank or other institutions, including any state accounting for 0.5 percent or more of world trade.42

The WTO is unlikely to undertake serious reform because all member states must approve any rule changes, “a formidable roadblock,” according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank. Yet, a failure to enact major reform proposals “could lead to the disintegration of key pillars of the organization,” the center concluded.43

In January, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said members had agreed to increase their defense spending by $100 billion. “There is no doubt that [Trump’s] very clear message is having an impact,” Stoltenberg said. “And the message was that . . . President Trump [is] committed to NATO, but we need fair burden sharing.”

The U.S. spends 3.5 percent of its GDP on defense.37
BACKGROUND

Isolationism

As George Washington left the presidency in 1796, he counseled fellow citizens about the risks of foreign entanglements. "Steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world," he advised. Take a neutral path, he said, by avoiding both "permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others."44

In its early years, the United States generally clung to an isolationist policy, except with regard to the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, which declared that the Western Hemisphere was America’s sphere of influence. In 1898, the United States used that doctrine to justify going to war against Spain, siding with Cuban revolutionaries seeking independence from the colonial power. The Spanish-American War ended with Cuba nominally independent and Spain ceding Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Guam to the United States as territories.45

In the early 20th century, the United States reverted to isolationism but was thrust into global pre-eminence by its involvement in two world wars, despite early efforts to remain neutral. In 1914, when World War I broke out in Europe, President Woodrow Wilson declared that the United States would remain neutral. But after German submarine attacks on U.S. vessels, Wilson abruptly reversed direction in 1917.46

Even before the war ended, Wilson—in his 1918 “Fourteen Points” speech—called for diplomatic transparency, freer trade, arms reduction and "a general association of nations [to provide] mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity," the founding principles of the League of Nations, championed by Wilson. Isolationist sentiment returned after the war ended, however, and the Senate refused to ratify the treaty. In fact, Congress passed four Neutrality Acts in the 1930s, aiming to keep the United States neutral by avoiding financial dealings with belligerents.47

Isolationism still reigned in the late 1930s and early 40s, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt was forced to heed public sentiment against entering World War II until Dec. 7, 1941, when Japan bombed the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor. Public opinion changed overnight, and Congress declared war on Japan the next day. Germany declared war against the United States four days later.

In 1944, before World War II ended, Roosevelt led a move to establish an array of major international institutions designed to prevent future wars and promote economic stability. Among those were two largely U.S.-financed international lending institutions: the World Bank, which provides aid to less developed nations, and the International Monetary Fund, which lends funds to help countries out of short-term currency crises. Roosevelt also pushed for establishment of the U.N., an international organization to promote global peace, which was created on Oct. 24, 1945, with the United States as a permanent and powerful member of its enforcement arm, the Security Council.48

Containment

After the war, Roosevelt’s successor, President Harry S. Truman, began to identify U.S. interests as global and espoused the Truman Doctrine—vowing “to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures.”49 As the Cold War emerged between the United States and the Soviet Union, the doctrine morphed into one of containment—using whatever diplomatic, economic and military means were necessary to contain the spread of Soviet communism. Often, the United States ended up siding with anti-communist dictators, such as when it helped the authoritarian Greek government put down an insurgency during a civil war in the late 1940s.

The Truman Doctrine also led to the Marshall Plan in 1948, and the Korean War in the early 1950s.

The Marshall Plan, named for its architect, Secretary of State George C. Marshall, provided $13 billion between 1948 and 1951 to help rebuild war-torn Europe. Besides jump-starting Western Europe’s economic recovery, the aid program required recipient countries to exclude communists from their governments and to purchase supplies from U.S. manufacturers whenever possible. The total gross national product among recipient nations increased by 32 percent during the four years the plan was in effect.50

Also under Truman, the United States in 1949 joined Canada and 10 European countries to form NATO. In response, in 1955 the Soviet Union created the Warsaw Pact, an alliance with its Eastern European satellite states, several of which would join NATO after the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1700s-1800s</td>
<td>Early America adopts an isolationist foreign policy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1796</td>
<td>George Washington warns against “permanent alliances.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1823</td>
<td>Monroe Doctrine establishes principle that Western Hemisphere is U.S. sphere of influence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>Spanish-American War ends with Cuba nominally independent and the U.S. with three territories: Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900-1945</td>
<td>U.S. participates in two world wars, beginning its ascent as a superpower.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1917-18</td>
<td>U.S. enters World War I; President Woodrow Wilson pushes for a League of Nations to foster international cooperation and prevent future wars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Isolationist Congress refuses to join new League of Nations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935-1939</td>
<td>Congress passes four Neutrality Acts aimed at keeping the U.S. out of foreign conflicts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor; U.S. declares war on Japan, and Germany in turn declares war on U.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>Bretton Woods conference lays plans for postwar world economic system, including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>World War II ends; United Nations is established to promote world peace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946-1980s</td>
<td>In Cold War, U.S. foreign policy focuses on multilateralism and containment of communism.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1947-50</td>
<td>President Harry S. Truman adopts a containment policy to limit Soviet expansion by aiding Greece and Turkey, introducing Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe and guaranteeing the security of Western Europe by joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1950-53</td>
<td>North Korea, aided by the Soviet Union, attacks South Korea. U.S.-led coalition intervenes on behalf of the South; truce leaves Korea divided.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Cuban missile crisis leads the U.S. and the Soviet Union to brink of nuclear war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>U.S. support for South Vietnam against communist North Vietnam leads to a major escalation of American forces. Protracted war results in domestic calls for retrenchment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>President Richard M. Nixon promotes opening to China and détente with the Soviet Union while maintaining containment strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>President Jimmy Carter makes support for human rights a major foreign policy objective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>President Ronald Reagan adopts hawkish foreign policies by increasing military spending, calling the Soviet Union an “evil empire,” and vowing to support democracy in communist countries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>U.S. invades Grenada, claiming it is enabling “Soviet-Cuban militarization” in the Caribbean.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986-87</td>
<td>Investigations reveal the Reagan administration illegally sold weapons to Iran and supported anti-communist insurgents in Nicaragua.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s-2000s</td>
<td>Cold War ends, leaving U.S. as sole superpower; rise of jihadist terrorism forces U.S. foreign policy to focus on the Middle East.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Sept. 11 terrorist attacks prompt President George W. Bush to launch NATO-backed attack on Afghanistan, which is protecting Osama bin Laden, the architect of the attacks and leader of al Qaeda, a jihadist group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Bush widens the conflict by declaring the right to “prevent or forestall” attacks by terrorists or others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2003 Bush invades Iraq in search for weapons of mass destruction (none are found) and ousts President Saddam Hussein. Years of U.S. occupation, chaos and ethnic violence ensue.

2006 Iran enriches uranium, triggering U.N. sanctions amid fears it will develop nuclear weapons; North Korea announces it has carried out its first nuclear test.

2009 Barack Obama begins presidency; calls for “new beginning” in U.S. relations with Muslim world.

2010-Present Pro-democracy movement sweeps Middle East.

2011-12 U.S. troops withdraw from Iraq; Arab Spring protests depose dictators in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt but spark prolonged civil war in Syria.

2015 Obama signs international agreement to curb Iran’s nuclear weapons development and the Paris climate accord to limit carbon emissions.

2016 Obama signs Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) to lower trade barriers in 12 Pacific countries. Donald Trump is elected president, vowing to follow an “America First” foreign policy.

2017 Trump withdraws U.S. from TPP; announces intention to leave climate accord and demands that NATO allies pay their share for maintaining the alliance.

2018 Trump withdraws U.S. from Iran nuclear deal, renegotiates NAFTA, meets North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to discuss removing nuclear weapons from Korean peninsula and embarks on trade war with China.

2019 Second Trump-Kim meeting ends without denuclearization agreement; U.S. and Russia announce they are pulling out of INF agreement.

In 1950, the West’s fears of aggressive communist expansion seemed to be realized when North Korea, backed by the Soviet Union (and later communist China), attacked South Korea. The United States, backed by U.N. troops, joined South Korea in the conflict. An inconclusive truce ended the fighting in 1953.

During most of the Cold War, the United States avoided direct military confrontations with the Soviet Union or China but often backed anti-communist governments or insurgents in proxy wars. But in October 1962, during President John F. Kennedy’s administration, Soviet bombers and launch sites for medium-range missiles capable of reaching the United States were discovered in Cuba. A tense two-week standoff raised the specter of nuclear war between the two superpowers. Eventually, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev agreed to remove the Soviet launchers and bombers in exchange for a U.S. pledge that it would not invade Cuba; the United States also removed its Turkey-based nuclear missiles targeting the Soviet Union.

Realpolitik

In the 1960s, Presidents Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson viewed the conflict in Vietnam between the communist North and pro-Western South as a critical test of U.S. containment policy. The so-called domino theory, first articulated by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1954, held that if Vietnam fell to the communists, nearby countries would follow.51

A small U.S. military presence in South Vietnam in the 1950s grew to 16,000 by 1963 and continued to increase. During U.S. involvement in the war, which officially ended in 1973, more than 2.7 million U.S. troops had served in Vietnam. Richard M. Nixon, elected president in 1968, initially expanded the war but eventually worked to end U.S. involvement. By the time the United States pulled out, the war had cost more than 58,000 American lives and an estimated $168 billion in military operations and economic aid.

There were other costs as well. The U.S. role in the war prompted sometimes-violent street protests at home and abroad and diminished world confidence in U.S. superiority. America turned inward, and the term “Vietnam syndrome” described the ensuing U.S. reluctance to intervene abroad.

The Nixon administration, under the direction of National Security Adviser and later Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, adopted Realpolitik—the theory that practical considerations rather than ideology should govern foreign relations. This approach enabled the
Populist Governments Are Up Fivefold

“The economic approach in Brussels and in Washington is failing.”

Populist politicians—who practice a brand of nationalist politics that claims to represent “the people” instead of society’s “elites”—are on a global roll.

Twenty governments, including the United States, now have populists either in charge of, or as part of, a governing coalition—a fivefold increase since 1990, according to the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, an international affairs research center in London. “Whereas populism was once found primarily in emerging democracies, populists are increasingly gaining power in systemically important countries,” the institute’s researchers said.

Some experts say that while President Trump, a populist, did not cause the global rise in populism, his friendliness toward and praise for populist leaders are fueling it. “There’s a lot of speculation about Trump’s effect on populist movements and leaders,” says Leslie Vinjamuri, head of the U.S. and the Americas Program at Chatham House, a London-based international affairs think tank.

One of Trump’s first foreign visitors to the White House was Nigel Farage, the right-wing British populist who helped engineer Brexit, the successful referendum calling for the United Kingdom to withdraw from the European Union (EU). Anti-EU sentiment is a major tenet of today’s European populists, and Trump has said EU trade policies have made the European Union a “foe” of the United States.

Brazil’s far-right populist president, Jair Bolsonaro, sometimes called “the Trump of the Tropics,” endeared himself to the American president with a Trump-like attack on “fake news” and a campaign vow to “make Brazil great.” Trump said he intended to designate Brazil a “major non-NATO ally,” which would give it preferential treatment in buying U.S. military equipment and receiving other security assistance.

Trump also has established warm relations with Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, and Polish President Andrzej Duda, populists who have been critical of the EU. Orbán, who has cracked down on the press, the judiciary and nonprofit groups to create what he calls an “illiberal” state, was the first world leader to endorse Trump’s election. Duda, who has overseen efforts to put Poland’s judicial system under the control of the ruling party, reportedly has offered the United States $2 billion toward construction of a U.S. military base in Poland that he proposed calling Fort Trump.

Vinjamuri says populist leaders like Orbán and Duda “serve to drive a wedge through Europe’s internal coherence in the post-Cold War period.” Max Bergmann, a policy analyst at the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank in Washington, says that could “allow countries like Russia and China to build ties within Europe,” serving as beachheads for them to weaken U.S. alliances there.
Some say Trump’s rhetoric encourages populists abroad. So too, they say, does his association with right-wing political strategist Steve Bannon and senior policy adviser Stephen Miller, known for his hardline views on immigration.7

Bannon, a controversial former adviser to Trump with ties to extreme right-wing U.S. groups, has established a populist think tank in Brussels called The Movement to promote anti-EU populist politicians. In March 2018, Bannon told supporters of France’s extreme right-wing National Front Party, led by populist politician Marine Le Pen, “Let them call you racist, let them call you xenophobes, let them call you nativist. Wear it as a badge of honor.”8

Bergmann has attributed the current wave of populism to the 2008 financial crisis, which he called “the biggest economic calamity since the Great Depression.” Even 10 years later, he says, there is “general angst in parts of the U.S. as well as Europe [and] a steeper divide between economic winners and losers. That angst is the sense that the economic approach in Brussels [the EU headquarters] and in Washington is failing,” particularly on behalf of industrial workers.

Bergmann says right-wing populists do not usually have an economic plan but that they do have scapegoats—typically immigrants. Politicians on both sides of the Atlantic, he says, can say, “Hey—you know why things are bad? It’s because the elites favor these open borders and cultural dilution.” Populists in the United States and Europe are appealing to a day when their countries were more ethnically and culturally homogeneous, he says.

But others see expanding populism as a sign of citizen participation in a healthy democracy. James Miller, professor of liberal studies and politics at The New School, a university in New York City, said, “Popular insurrections and revolts in the name of democracy have become a recurrent feature of global politics and form the heart and soul of modern democracy as a living reality.”

At various times and “in virtually every country,” he continued, “crowds of ordinary people unite to demand a fairer share of the common wealth [and more truly] democratic institutions.” Such revolts “against remote elites are essential to the vitality, and viability, of modern democracy.”9

Yves Leterme, former prime minister of Belgium and secretary-general of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, a democracy-promotion think tank in Stockholm, and Sam van der Staak, head of the institute’s Europe program, also find some positive features in populism. Populist parties have “made reforming the political system a key part of their agenda,” they wrote, and have championed policies that give citizens “who feel alienated by their government a sense of control.”

Mainstream parties that “embrace populism’s better ideas will be the ones who survive to shape the political future,” they said.10

— Bill Wanlund

Economic Sanctions Can Be Double-Edged

“There’s a danger in overusing” them.

Countries commonly use economic sanctions— restrictions on commerce imposed on countries, companies or individuals—as a nonmilitary method of inducing them to change their behavior.

The United States is by far the world’s leader in applying sanctions. As of Feb. 1, it was enforcing sanctions on 20 countries and some 6,300 individuals, according to the U.S. Treasury Department.

Sanctions typically target certain commercial activities with an entire country or certain industries or companies in a country, or they block the financial assets of individuals such as terrorists, drug traffickers or corrupt government officials. An embargo—or a complete ban on all commercial activity with one or more countries—is another type of sanction. Sanctions usually are designed to enhance the sanctioning country’s security or to punish another country’s behavior, such as human rights violations or aggression against another nation.

“Sanctions often are used if diplomacy and words alone are insufficient but use of military force is too costly or extreme to effect the changes they want against a government that is behaving badly,” says Bryan Early, an associate professor of political science at the University at Albany, State University of New York, who researches sanctions.

Nigel Gould-Davies, a lecturer in international relations at Bangkok’s Mahidol University, cites the international sanctions imposed on Russia in 2014 for its incursions into Ukraine as having proved “more effective, more quickly, than their advocates expected.”

Russia has not returned Crimea or withdrawn from Ukraine, he said, but the sanctions, imposed by the United States, the European Union and others, had three goals: to deter further Russian military aggression; to reaffirm international norms and condemn their violation; and to encourage Russia to reach a political settlement with Ukraine. “Judged against those goals, sanctions have largely worked,” Gould-Davies said.

But sanctions achieve their goals only about one-quarter to one-third of the time, studies show.

Sanctions fail, Early says, when the sanctioned countries “find other states willing to support them for geopolitical reasons.” For instance, he says, communist Cuba has survived a U.S. embargo since 1960 with support from the Soviet Union during the Cold War and later from China and Venezuela.

Former State Department economics official E. Anthony Wayne agrees that sanctions can fail. “There’s a danger in overusing sanctions,” he says. “Eventually, the people you’re sanctioning will just find other ways to get around the U.S. economy.”

And unilateral sanctions—those imposed by only one country—in particular often do not work, he says. “It takes pressure from all different angles to make a country change,” he says. “Unilateral sanctions can harm individuals, so the sanctions that target specific companies and individuals do have an impact, but it’s rare that they can bring a whole country to change its ways.”

Wayne argues that the Trump administration may be over-relying on unilateral sanctions and neglecting diplomatic efforts needed to get other countries to join in. The United States has imposed unilateral sanctions on several countries, including those already under multilateral sanctions, such as Russia and North Korea. When President Trump pulled the United States out of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal last year, he announced that he was reinstating the tough U.S. sanctions suspended by the agreement. Under the renewed sanctions, U.S. companies could no longer trade with Iran, and neither could any foreign company wanting to continue doing business with the United States.

Staunchly conservative Nixon in 1972 to be the first U.S. president to visit the People’s Republic of China, a communist nation since 1949. The normalization of U.S.-China relations helped widen a rift between China and Russia that strengthened the U.S. position in the Cold War. Also in 1972, Nixon went to the Soviet Union, initiating a series of arms control measures and a period of détente between the two rivals.

During his administration, President Jimmy Carter sought to make protecting human rights a major foreign policy objective, and Congress ordered the State Department to produce an annual report evaluating
Trump’s unilateral move did not sit well with the European signatories to the nuclear agreement. To avoid the renewed U.S. sanctions, Britain, Germany and France in late January created a complicated workaround mechanism called the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX). It would allow Iran to continue doing business with other countries by paying for goods through a barter system, avoiding use of the dollar and the U.S. banking system. It is unclear how successful INSTEX will be.

In the meantime, the renewed sanctions have hurt Iran’s economy: Oil exports, Iran’s main source of income, have dropped 60 percent since Trump reinstated sanctions, and Iran’s economy is expected to shrink by 3.6 percent this year.

Despite the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal, Iran so far has continued to abide by the terms of the agreement, according to CIA Director Gina Haspel and the International Atomic Energy Agency, which monitors nuclear weapons activity worldwide.

Early says sanctions can have unintended consequences: Authoritarian regimes often are willing to allow their populations to suffer the negative economic consequences created by sanctions in order to advance their objectives. “Broad-based sanctions are . . . good at inflicting broad-scale harms against their targets, but they’re not very good at actually forcing the regimes to change their behavior,” he says.

Sanctions also have been associated with a range of social and political harms, says Early, such as making governments more repressive when leaders “use the restrictions imposed on them as an excuse for consolidating their authoritative regimes. So, even if the sanctions don’t force the government to change their policies, they can, inadvertently but effectively, do harm to the country.”

— Bill Wanlund

An Iranian man burns a dollar bill in November 2018 outside the former U.S. embassy in Tehran during a demonstration marking the anniversary of the 1979 Iran hostage crisis. President Trump pulled the United States out of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, and the administration has imposed unilateral economic sanctions on Iran.

3. Ibid.
in communist countries. In 1983, he sent troops to Grenada to oust a Marxist military junta. His administration also illegally sold weapons to Iran and used the proceeds to support anti-communist insurgents in Nicaragua.54

Meanwhile, reform-minded Soviet Premier Gorbachev had begun to restructure the hidebound Soviet system. In 1987, he and Reagan signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, representing the first time the superpowers had agreed to eliminate an entire category of nuclear weapons.55

Also in 1987, speaking near the Berlin Wall separating democratic West Berlin from Soviet-controlled East Berlin, Reagan challenged Gorbachev to “tear down this wall.”56

Two years later, East German citizens themselves began to dismantle the wall, and the authorities did not intervene. That year, the nominally independent Eastern European countries that were part of the Warsaw Pact, such as Poland and Hungary, began to distance themselves from the Soviet Union. Two years later, Soviet republics such as the Baltic states and Ukraine would be moving toward independence.

In January 1991, the United States, under President George H. W. Bush, led a U.N.-authorized coalition to expel the Iraqis from Kuwait, which they had invaded the previous August to seize its oil fields. After a six-week campaign, the coalition had routed the Iraqis, but Bush decided not to remove Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein from power, believing it would be too costly and could have fractured the coalition, created solely to oust Iraq from Kuwait.

On Christmas Day that year, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was officially dissolved, ending the Cold War.

**War on Terror**

Bill Clinton’s presidency opened in 1993 amid a changed world. The Soviet Union’s collapse left the United States without its archenemy. International problems arose, but they lacked the clear-and-present-danger character that would rally public support for intervention.

For instance, in Bosnia in 1993 Orthodox Christian Serb fighters conducted a brutal ethnic cleansing program against Muslims. Faced with conflicting advice and sketchy intelligence, Clinton waited until 1995 to initiate a U.S.-led NATO bombing campaign against Bosnian Serb targets, finally bringing the Serbs to the negotiating table. The resulting Dayton Accords brought peace, backed by a 60,000-member NATO force. An estimated 100,000 people had died in the civil war, about 80 percent of them Muslims.57

During the Clinton administration, al Qaeda jihadist leader Osama bin Laden demanded that U.S. military forces leave Saudi Arabia and issued a “Fatwa” against the United States in 1998, declaring that killing “Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country.”58 About six months later, Qaeda suicide truck-bombers struck U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing 224. Clinton responded by bombing suspected Qaeda targets in Afghanistan and Sudan. Two years later, Qaeda operatives rammed an explosives-filled boat into the USS Cole, a Navy destroyer refueling in Yemen, killing 17 sailors.59

Qaeda bombers again struck the United States, in devastating fashion, early in the administration of Clinton’s successor, George W. Bush. To root out those responsible for the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States, with NATO support, invaded Afghanistan, where bin Laden and al Qaeda were based.60 Bush also declared a worldwide war on terror and instituted several fundamental changes in U.S. foreign policy, notably opting for unilateral action instead of multilateral initiatives and espousing a doctrine of preventive or pre-emptive war.
In March 2003, the United States led a 30-nation coalition of mostly European countries, recruited by Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell, to invade Iraq over what later proved to be unfounded claims that Iraq was stockpiling weapons of mass destruction. Hussein was deposed (and later executed by Iraqis), but no such weapons were found. The invasion damaged America’s global standing.

By the time the United States left Iraq in 2010, more than 4,400 Americans and tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians had died. Years of conflict followed, fed by political and ethnic rivalries and jihadist terrorist attacks, creating fertile ground for the Islamic State to establish a caliphate there in 2014.61

Shortly after his inauguration in 2009, President Obama tried to repair damaged relations with the Middle East, proposing in a speech in Cairo “a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect.”62 His foreign policy aimed to use diplomacy rather than force, and he maintained a cool relationship with Putin and other authoritarian leaders.

Despite his noninterventionist stance, Obama ordered an 18-month “surge” of 30,000 troops to Afghanistan to train the Afghan military in their fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban, domestic religious militants who had controlled most of the country before the U.S.-led invasion in 2001. He also authorized a special operations raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan, on May 2, 2011, that found and killed bin Laden.

Although al Qaeda’s influence has diminished, the Islamic State and other terrorist groups have filled the void—many based in Afghanistan, where the United States has been fighting for more than 17 years.63

Obama also had to respond to pro-democracy demonstrations that churned the Middle East, especially Egypt, during the Arab Spring of 2011-12. Eventually, dictators in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt were deposed, but protests in Syria sparked a prolonged civil war.

After weeks of massive public demonstrations in Egypt, Obama called for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to step down, which he eventually did. But Obama offered only a tepid response to government crackdowns on protesters in Bahrain, home to two U.S. Navy facilities. He helped the opposition in Libya depose dictator Moammar Gadhafi, but later said he regretted not foreseeing the chaos that followed Gadhafi’s overthrow.64

Obama also promoted the downfall of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and warned him in August 2012 that the United States would respond if he crossed “a red line” by using chemical weapons against Syrian civilians. A year later, Assad did use such weapons, killing hundreds of people in two sarin gas attacks in the Damascus suburbs. Obama sought congressional authorization for a retaliatory missile strike, but Congress refused to vote on the request, and Obama in the end did not act. That decision was “a serious mistake” that “impacted American credibility,” Obama’s Secretary of Defense Robert Gates later said.

Instead, the United States and Russia negotiated a deal in which Assad agreed to give up his chemical weapons, which he did, but he later used similar weapons.65

Obama’s signature foreign policy achievements both occurred in 2015: signing the international agreement under which Iran agreed to limit its nuclear weapons development in return for the lifting of economic sanctions and the completion of the Paris climate accord, in which 195 countries agreed to limit carbon emissions that are warming the planet.66

During Obama’s last year in office, the United States signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an agreement to lower trade barriers among 12 countries in the Pacific region.67

“America First”

President Trump came into office with vastly different ideas about multilateral agreements, vowing to scrap or amend those that he felt did not protect American interests and workers. He also differs in how he treats and negotiates with dictators such as Putin and North Korea’s Kim Jong Un, both of whom he has praised as being strong.

Right away Trump made it a point to distinguish his administration from that of his predecessor. He immediately pulled out of the TPP and later the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate accord. Trump also renegotiated the 24-year-old North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) among the United States, Mexico and Canada, which he called “a bad joke.” Congress has yet to ratify the new United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement.68
And, in a Cairo speech laying out the administration’s Middle East policy, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticized Obama for “willful blindness” to “the danger of the [Iran] regime” when he signed the 2015 nuclear agreement, and for criticizing Israel.69

A longtime critic of what he sees as China’s discriminator trade barriers, theft of intellectual property and economic espionage, Trump imposed $250 billion worth of tariffs on Chinese imports, demanding that China mend its ways. China retaliated with $110 billion in import tariffs on U.S. products.70

On Dec. 1, 2018, Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed to a 90-day “truce,” since extended, while the two countries negotiated a range of economic irritants. Without an agreement, Trump threatened to raise tariffs on another $200 billion of Chinese products, and China said it would respond with punitive measures.71

Trump has also made removing North Korea’s nuclear threat a top foreign policy goal. His relationship with Kim had a rocky start: Trump threatened “fire and fury” if Kim continued provocative missile tests and belittled Kim as “Rocket Man;” Kim called Trump a “mentally deranged U.S. dotard.”72

Then the two met in Singapore in June 2018 to discuss removing nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula, the first-ever meeting between leaders of the two countries. Although no concrete steps toward denuclearization took place, both sides made concessions: North Korea paused its nuclear weapons testing program and dismantled some weapons-making facilities, and the United States cancelled scheduled joint military exercises with South Korea.

As the Trump-Kim relationship grew warmer, Trump told a campaign audience in West Virginia that Kim had sent him “beautiful letters” and “we fell in love.”73

However, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho disputed this account, saying his country had only demanded partial relief from the sanctions in exchange for closing its main nuclear complex, and that the talks ended when the United States demanded further disarmament steps. An unidentified State Department official said Ri was only “parsing words” and that the North Koreans had asked for the lifting of all sanctions except those on weapons.75

After walking out of the summit, Trump told a press conference that lifting sanctions before Pyongyang has dismantled its nuclear program would allow Kim to continue producing weapons of mass destruction, and “we couldn’t do that.”76

White House National Security Adviser John Bolton said Trump had simply rejected “a bad deal.”77 Even some of Trump’s critics agreed. “The president did the right thing by walking away,” said Obama’s vice president, Joe Biden.78

Days after the summit collapsed, South Korean and U.S. intelligence officials said satellite imagery showed that North Korea appeared to have rebuilt a satellite rocket launching facility it had dismantled as a confidence-building measure after the first summit, and that the work had begun even before the Feb. 27-28 Hanoi meeting.79

Two weeks later North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui told reporters in Pyongyang that the United States, with its “gangster-like stand,” had thrown away “a golden opportunity.” In addition, she said, “we understood very clearly that the United States has a very different calculation to ours.”80

John Delury, an expert on East Asia at Seoul’s Yonsei University, said Choe’s comments did not necessarily mean further negotiations would be abandoned, noting that there was no name-calling or insults and that Choe praised Kim’s relationship with Trump. “A lot of this is rhetoric or posturing, but both sides have been careful not to fling mud,” he said. “This is each side reminding each other what’s at stake.”81

On March 22, Trump tweeted that he was rolling back new sanctions his administration planned to impose on North Korea.82 The decision apparently surprised the president’s foreign policy advisers, and White House spokesperson Sarah Sanders said only, “President Trump likes Chairman Kim, and he doesn’t think these sanctions will be necessary.”

On March 25, Sanders told reporters: “The sanctions that were in place before are certainly still on. They are

CURRENT SITUATION

North Korea and China

Expectations for an agreement with North Korea were high in February, when Trump and Kim met again in Hanoi, Vietnam. Trump had scheduled a signing ceremony before the talks had even started. But the summit ended early after Kim reportedly insisted that the United States lift nearly all U.S. economic sanctions on his country before he would start incrementally dismantling his nuclear weapons program.74
Should the United States continue promoting democracy abroad?

**YES**

Thomas Carothers  
Senior Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Written for CQ Researcher, March 2019

Analyses of the role of democracy promotion in U.S. foreign policy often emphasize the tension between American ideals and interests abroad. Ideals may be nice, the argument typically goes, but hard interests, above all security, need to take priority.

This is not a useful framing. Supporting democracy abroad is not just about living up to U.S. ideals. Just as importantly, it is about advancing hard U.S. interests. Most of America’s closest security relationships are with democracies. Most of our geopolitical rivals are non-democracies. Of course, there are exceptions. Certain nondemocracies are useful security partners. But when our security partners are repressive and corrupt, we have to be significantly concerned about the destabilizing anger and radicalism they generate internally.

A more democratic world is one in which the United States has more allies and fewer adversaries. Regions dominated by democracies, such as Europe, South Asia and Latin America, are places where the United States has stable, productive partnerships. Regions dominated by autocracies, such as the Middle East, the former Soviet Union and parts of Asia, are sources of geopolitical conflict and competition.

Thus, for example, supporting democratic reform in Ukraine is not just a good thing to do for the Ukrainian people; it increases the chances that the Ukrainian government will productively balance the country’s ties with Russia and friendly relations with the West. Stabilizing the democratic experiment in Tunisia is not just some idealistic venture; it is crucial to helping head off potentially dangerous radicalization or civil conflict. A more democratic Venezuela is less likely to ally itself with Russia and China, shelter drug trafficking or precipitate a regional humanitarian crisis, as Venezuela’s authoritarian regime has done in recent years.

Making support for democracy an integral part of U.S. foreign policy does not mean full-bore democracy promotion everywhere all the time, pushing our political model on others and going it alone. Nor does it mean intervening militarily at great cost as in Afghanistan and Iraq—those interventions were primarily motivated by security concerns and were not representative cases of democracy promotion. Instead, it means—or it should mean—modulating U.S. pro-democracy diplomacy and assistance to take account of local political conditions and the overall balance of U.S. interests. It also means supporting homegrown efforts to advance democracy and working closely with other governments engaged in democracy support, as well as with relevant international organizations and nongovernmental organizations, on a broad positive-sum approach.

**NO**

Henry R. Nau  
Professor of Political Science and International Affairs, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University; Author, Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy  
Under Jefferson, Polk, Truman and Reagan

Written for CQ Researcher, March 2019

Under current circumstances the United States should defend, not promote, democracy. And that defense should be targeted on Eastern Europe and the Korean Peninsula, not everywhere across the globe.

The United States pursued a more aggressive policy after World War II when it confronted an existential threat from an anti-democratic power, the Soviet Union. Germany and Japan became enduringly democratic for the first time in their history. And the United States did so again when it emerged from the Cold War as the world’s sole superpower. More than 60 countries became democratic, some durably (South Korea), others still struggling (Poland).

The United States paid a disproportionate price for these gains. U.S. soldiers manned the ramparts of freedom around the world and died or were wounded too frequently in long wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. U.S. workers moved relentlessly from one job to another to accommodate exports and create jobs for other countries. And U.S. society heaved under the disruption of immigrant flows that totaled more than 59 million from 1965 to 2015. In the end, the United States benefitted from this liberal world order. It defeated communism, grew wealthier and became a less racist and more diverse society.

But enough is enough. Circumstances have changed. Today the United States neither faces an existential threat nor enjoys unchallenged pre-eminence. Terrorism is not the equivalent of a new Cold War, democratic allies are now equal in wealth and technology, and authoritarian powers—China and Russia—challenge the United States regionally rather than globally.

In these circumstances, defending, not expanding, democracy is the strategic imperative. While Europe is whole and free for the first time ever, Russia strikes to weaken it. Moscow seizes territory in Ukraine and menaces struggling democracies in Poland, Hungary and the Baltic states. China extinguishes freedom at home and bulldozes peaceful aspirations in the South China Sea and on the Korean Peninsula. If Ukraine succumbs to Russian thuggery and Korea stabilizes or unites under the authoritarian talons of China, all the postwar gains of democracy may be lost.

Thus, holding out the prospects of freedom in Ukraine and Korea far outweigh the loss or gain of freedom anywhere else in the world. In the Middle East and elsewhere, the United States should counter threats but not deploy large numbers of U.S. forces and resources to build democratic nations. Circumstances allow the United States to take a break. The American people have earned it.
very tough sanctions. The president just doesn’t feel it’s necessary to add additional sanctions at this time. . . . The president likes him [Kim]. They want to continue to negotiate and see what happens.83

Harry Kazianis, director of Korean studies at the conservative think tank Center for the National Interest, said Trump might be trying to reduce tensions between Washington and Pyongyang and keep North Korea from pulling out of the negotiations.84

But an unnamed administration official quoted in The New York Times denied Trump made the decision in order to speed progress toward an agreement, telling reporters, “It would be a mistake to interpret the policy as being one . . . where we release some sanctions in return for piecemeal steps toward denuclearization. That is not a winning formula and it is not the president’s strategy.”85

The Trump administration has tried to get China, which accounts for 90 percent of North Korea’s trade, to pressure Kim to dismantle its nuclear arsenal.86 However, U.S. relations with China have been complicated by the ongoing trade dispute.

Negotiations during the trade-war truce reportedly have shown signs of progress, and Trump extended the original March 1 deadline. Trump and Xi are expected to meet in late spring or early summer at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida.

Both sides have suffered during the trade war. American farmers and manufacturers have lost sales due to increased tariffs on their exports to China. But some economists say that China, with its slowing economy and greater reliance on exports, has been hurt more than the United States.87

**Trans-Atlantic Relations**

Trump has said he is not worried about his low popularity in Europe. “I shouldn’t be popular in Europe,” he said in January. “I’m not elected by Europeans; I’m elected by Americans.”88

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow specializing in foreign policy at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, agrees that it doesn’t matter if Trump is unpopular abroad. “If another country is irritated because the U.S. says ‘You should be capable of defending yourself,’ that doesn’t strike me as a major problem,” he says.

But Leslie Vinjamuri, head of the U.S. and Americas Program at Chatham House, a nonpartisan think tank in London, says Trump’s skepticism toward NATO could alter trans-Atlantic diplomacy “for a long time,” because “reliability and predictability are at issue.”

In March, former Vice President Richard B. Cheney, who served under Republican President George W. Bush, sharply criticized Trump’s foreign policy at a private retreat sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank. Cheney told Vice President Pence that Trump’s policies feed “this notion on the part of our allies overseas, especially in NATO, that we’re not long for that continued relationship,” according to The Washington Post.

Cheney also complained about reports that Trump plans to demand that Germany, Japan, South Korea and other countries that host U.S. troops pay the full cost for such deployments plus 50 percent. Noting that NATO countries are fighting alongside U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan, Cheney said that foreign relations are “a lot more complicated than just: ‘Here’s the bottom line. Write the check.’”89

Pence defended the administration’s policies. “I think there is a tendency by critics of the president and our administration to conflate the demand that our allies live up to their . . . commitments and an erosion in our commitment to the post-World War II order,” Pence said. “This president is skeptical of foreign deployments and only wants American forces where they need to be.”90

Two days later, signaling bipartisan support for the alliance, congressional leaders said they were inviting NATO chief Stoltenberg to address a joint session of Congress in April to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the organization.92

Not all European countries are dissatisfied with Trump. He gets favorable ratings in Poland and Hungary, where anti-immigrant, nationalist leaders have emerged. Hungarian-American writer Boris Kálnoky explained Eastern Europeans’ affinity for Trump: “We like plainspoken men who have the [guts] to say what they’re thinking. If they’re vulgar, so much the better.”

The president also “represents the idea that the United States is, and should remain, the most powerful country in the world,” which is a “powerful guarantee of our security,” he said.93
Western European allies were disappointed on Feb. 1, when Trump announced the United States was withdrawing from the INF Treaty on midrange nuclear weapons with Russia. German Chancellor Merkel said it was “unavoidable” after “years of violations of the terms of the treaty by Russia.” However, she lamented, the pact “directly affects our security . . . and we are left sitting there.”

Trump and Putin say each other’s country has repeatedly violated the treaty. Trump also has noted that China, which is not a signatory, is developing intermediate-range missiles. “If Russia’s [building its arsenal] and if China’s doing it, and we’re adhering to the agreement, that’s unacceptable,” he said.

Terrorism and Iran
Secretary of State Pompeo’s Jan. 10 Middle East policy speech in Cairo stressed concern for Israel and a desire to strengthen relations with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other countries friendly to the United States. He promised to reduce the threat to Israel from Lebanon-based Hezbollah militants and to stifle Iran’s “deadly ambitions.”

A month later, Pompeo told a Middle East summit in Warsaw, Poland: “You can’t achieve stability in the Middle East without confronting Iran.” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu echoed those sentiments, but he also called the summit a group of nations “sitting down together with Israel in order to advance the common interest of war with Iran.”

Democratic Sens. Tom Udall of New Mexico and Richard Durbin of Illinois worry about just such a scenario. Trump is “barreling toward war with Iran,” they said, using “false narratives that Iran is not meeting its obligations under the nuclear deal.” The senators said Trump is being egged on by Pompeo and Bolton, whom they called “committed advocates of virtually unchecked interventionism.”

In a March 5 Washington Post op-ed, Udall and Durbin said Trump’s breach of the Iran nuclear deal had left the United States isolated and that Congress must “end the growing threat of a national security calamity, return our country to diplomacy and rebuild international trust in U.S. foreign policy.” The two are preparing to introduce bipartisan legislation to restrict U.S. funds from being used to attack Iran.

Carnegie president Burns said pulling out of the Iran deal “added to the fissures between us and our closest European allies, [and] in a way it’s done Vladimir Putin’s work for him” by sowing discord among the allies.

Meanwhile, on Dec. 19, 2018, Trump unexpectedly announced the “full and rapid” withdrawal of the 2,200 U.S. troops from Syria, declaring that ISIS had been defeated—and prompting the resignation of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, who disagreed with the decision. On Jan. 6, Trump backtracked, saying “we won’t be finally pulled out until ISIS is gone.”

Such actions exemplify Trump’s shoot-from-the-hip approach to diplomacy and its negative consequences, critics say.

“Careless talk about the fight against ISIS being over is counterproductive [and] undermines our counterterrorism efforts and undermines our partners” in the region, says Daniel Benjamin, former State Department coordinator for counterterrorism and now director of Dartmouth College’s John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding.

On March 23, U.S.-backed forces announced they had driven ISIS fighters out of the last territory they had been occupying in Syria. However, U.S. intelligence officials say ISIS is far from finished as a fighting force. According to Russ Travers, deputy director of the National Counterterrorism Center, about 14,000 armed and active ISIS fighters remain in Syria and Iraq.

“A lot of ISIS has gone to ground and obviously there needs to be more engagement there” before it is no longer a threat, Benjamin says.

Venezuela
Trump told the U.N. General Assembly last year, “The United States will not tell you how to live or work or worship.” But events in Venezuela have put that pledge to the test.

On Jan. 23, Trump pronounced the regime of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, re-elected last May in a vote widely regarded as rigged, “illegitimate.” Trump said he considered Juan Guaidó, president of the legislative National Assembly, the lawful interim president. Some 50 other Latin American and European countries also support Guaidó.

On Jan. 29, the administration announced sanctions effectively blocking imports of oil from Venezuela’s
state-owned oil company, the country’s biggest revenue source. Venezuela, with the world’s largest proven oil reserves, shipped 500,000 barrels of crude a day to the United States in 2018, representing about 75 percent of the cash it received for its crude exports.106

“Trump said the United States wouldn’t interfere in other countries’ business,” says Thomas Carothers, a senior vice president at the Carnegie Endowment, “but when it comes to countries we can’t get along with, he points to their internal values and says that’s a problem. There’s an inconsistency.”

OUTLOOK
End of ‘Unipower’

Foreign policy experts tend to agree that Trump’s presidency has coincided with a disruption in the international order that prevailed during much of the postwar period. They are far less united, however, on what will replace that order or on Trump’s ultimate impact on the world.

American University’s Adams, who calls himself a foreign policy “realist,” says the United States’ days as a “unipower” are over, but through no fault of its own. “Power is rebalancing. We couldn’t have prevented the rebalancing of global power after the Cold War,” he says. “It’s not something brought on by Donald Trump,” but his role has been “that of accelerant.”

Ohio State’s Schweller, who also calls himself a foreign policy realist, says, “For the U.S., there really are very few threats right now,” although China is a looming competitor. Terrorism, meanwhile, is “a sideshow, a minor discomfort [but] not something we should spend too much time focusing on in our foreign policy. We’re currently in a threat trough, so the U.S. should act accordingly and retrench.”

It is unclear whether Trump’s nationalism has left an indelible stamp on how the United States conducts diplomacy. For Thomas Wright, director of the Center on the United States and Europe at Brookings, the next presidential election is key.

If Trump is defeated in 2020, he predicts, “a lot of U.S. foreign policy would revert to some version of internationalism.” But if Trump is re-elected, “over time he will be able to get his agenda through, and a lot of people will say America has fundamentally changed, and we will have to adjust accordingly.”

But Carnegie’s Burns is optimistic that American diplomacy will return to a place of legitimacy “over the medium term,” regardless of how much it is “belittled and disdained today.”107

Salman Ahmed, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment, has some advice for U.S. leaders: “The strategic and economic rationale for the U.S. acting abroad is less clear than in the past. Those with responsibility for clarifying it would be wise to step back and try to understand what Americans think about it.”

Ahmed is overseeing a series of state-level case studies to record how middle-class Americans view foreign policy and its impact on their economic well-being. He says those views are more nuanced than the country’s political polarization would suggest.

“People get it,” he says. “They know the 1960s aren’t coming back. They have legitimate questions, though. What’s going to happen to their town if it was dependent on a labor-intensive, heavy manufacturing practice which has gone away? Whatever caused it—trade and economic policies or something else—something has radically changed for them.”

Former diplomat Shannon says, “In many ways, we’re experiencing the end of a certain structure of the world order . . . driven by social and economic changes.

“We’re kind of at a moment of re-founding, where the American people want a larger conversation with our collective leadership about what we’re doing in the world,” Shannon says. “And whether you like him or not, the president is the catalyst of that discussion.”

NOTES


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13. Ibid.


17. Babones, op. cit.


19. Ibid.


22. Ibid., p. 5.


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80. Ibid.

81. Ibid.


90. Costa and Parker, Ibid.

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100. “Face the Nation,” op. cit.


BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


A Tufts University political scientist says the United States’ overwhelming wealth and military might, if used wisely, will assure its continued international dominance.


The president of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (Daalder) and senior vice president at the Council on Foreign Relations (Lindsay) argue that the United States has abandoned its commitment to alliances, free trade, democracy and human rights.


A senior fellow at the Brookings Institution warns that rising nationalism threatens the relative peace, prosperity and progressive character of the post-World War II years.


Two British historians explain that President Trump’s foreign policy views, far from being impulsive and improvised, were formed in the 1980s and are deeply rooted in American history.
Articles

A professor at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University says as the U.S. share of global power shrinks, it must coexist with China, Russia and other emerging powers with their own ideas of how the world should be run.

A professor of international relations at the London School of Economics dissects various theories on why populism is on the rise and on its possible consequences.

A professor of international affairs at George Washington University writes that the president’s unilateral foreign policy, based on national sovereignty rather than international institutions, is what the United States needs now.

The former dean of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government and a former Defense Department official urges a return to multilateralism in U.S. dealings with China and in other foreign policy challenges.

The founding co-editor of the *Journal of Democracy* and co-chair of the Research Council of the International Forum for Democratic Studies writes that the rise of right-wing populist parties in Europe and Latin America threatens liberal democracy.

Reports and Studies

The Trump administration outlines its plans to defend the homeland from economic, military and diplomatic threats, both foreign and domestic.

The Pentagon analyzes defense challenges facing the United States and the military’s response.

Analysts from the research arm of Congress examine the history of the World Trade Organization and the challenges it faces in today’s economic and political environment, emphasizing the role of the United States.

Two researchers at the nonpartisan institute define populism, evaluate its impact and track its growth in a global database.

Researchers examine the Trump administration’s national security strategy in the context of the new military, economic and political competition facing the United States.

THE NEXT STEP

North Korea

In the latest indication of increased tension between the United States and North Korea, Pyongyang condemned a U.S.-South Korean military exercise, even though it was reduced in scope.

The bite of U.S. economic sanctions has driven North Korea to resort to digital bank heists, according to U.S. officials.


While both sides bear responsibility for the failed North Korea-U.S. summit, the United States “made excessive demands” by abruptly toughening its stance to demand complete North Korean denuclearization, says a South Korean national security adviser.

Russia

The Trump administration plans to impose sanctions on companies and investors involved in a natural gas pipeline project that would increase German consumption of Russian gas.


The United States is preparing to test a ground-launched cruise missile previously banned by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty shortly after the U.S. withdrawal from the accord takes effect this summer.


A bipartisan group of senators has proposed legislation that would impose new sanctions on Russia’s banks, cyber sector and energy industry.

Sanctions

Market projections that show global oil supply exceeding demand may enable the United States to increase its pressure on Iranian energy exports, a State Department official said.


The Trump administration is allowing lawsuits against some Cuban businesses and government agencies, but the effect is likely to be largely symbolic because most of the targeted entities are not connected to the U.S. legal or financial systems.


The United States is increasing its economic pressure on the regime of Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro, but there is debate about whether the strategy is appropriate given the increased suffering it is causing.

Trade War

China is prepared to ease tariffs and other restrictions on U.S. goods if the United States lifts most of the trade sanctions it imposed last year, says a Beijing-based finance reporter and a Wall Street Journal senior editor.


U.S. farmers are still planting soybeans, despite losing their biggest market because of the U.S.-China trade dispute, because of a lack of good alternatives.


Heightened U.S. concerns over technology security may be preventing Chinese-born workers from getting technology access work permits, says a Beijing-based reporter.
For More Information


**Center for American Progress**, 1333 H St., N.W., 10th Floor, Washington, DC, 20005; 202-682-1611; www.americanprogress.org. Think tank providing liberal perspective on global and domestic policy issues.


**Heritage Foundation**, 214 Massachusetts Ave., N.E., Washington DC 20002-4999; 202-546-4400; www.heritage.org. Conservative public-policy think tank that promotes public policies, including foreign policies, based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, traditional American values and a strong national defense.


**Royal Institute of International Affairs**, Chatham House, 10 St James’ Square, London SW1Y 4LE; +44 (0)20 7957 5700; www.chathamhouse.org. Nongovernmental, nonpartisan British institute that analyzes major international issues from a European perspective.
