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The U.S. decline under Trump

by [Fareed Zakaria](#)

Daniel Kahneman, who won a Nobel Prize in economics for reshaping our understanding of human motivation, once [said](#): “No one ever made a decision because of a number. They need a story.” That’s as true for nations as for individuals. Countries have always oriented themselves within a larger international story. But what is today’s global story?

For decades, the great overarching narrative was the Cold War. Almost every nation acted or reacted in the context of that ideological, political and military struggle. Then came 1989 and the collapse of communism. For the next 20 years or so, the opening up of the world — globalization — became the dominant thread, as countries jostled to become hot new markets and Western democratic capitalism seemed inevitable, undergirded by U.S. power and prestige. The attacks of 9/11 dealt a sharp blow to this benign narrative and, for a while, Islamist terrorism seemed to be steering the course of history. But terrorism has proved too weak and limited a force to be the big global story.

So what is it now? I would argue that the largest trend today is the decline of American influence. Not the decline of American power — the country remains economically and militarily in a league of its own — but a decline of its desire and capacity to use that power to shape the world. The current administration seems intent on dismantling the United States’ great achievements — [as it is doing](#) with the World Trade Organization — or to simply be uninterested in setting the global agenda. Donald Trump will be the first president in nearly a century to end his first year in office [without having held a state dinner](#) for a foreign head of state.

And this erosion of U.S. global leadership is already causing other countries to adjust.

This month, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel [declared](#) that “the most important changes affecting our Western world and, indeed, the world as a whole” stem from “the United States’ current withdrawal under Trump from its role as a reliable guarantor of Western-influenced multilateralism.” That shift, he [noted](#), “is accelerating the transformation of the global order . . . and the risk of trade wars, arms races and armed conflicts is increasing.”

For Europe, Gabriel argued, the situation is almost existential. Since the end of World War II, he said, “Europe had been an American project in the United States’ clearly understood interests. However, the current U.S. administration now perceives Europe in a very distanced way, regarding previous partners as competitors and sometimes even as at the very least economic opponents.” He urged Europe to take its fate into its own hands and decouple itself from U.S. foreign policy.

Consider also the speech in June by Canada’s foreign minister, [Chrystia Freeland](#), in which she thanked the United States for its seven-decade-long stewardship of the international system and strongly implied that, under the Trump administration, American leadership of that system had reached its end.

Meanwhile, Chinese President Xi Jinping gave a speech to the 19th Communist Party Congress in October that reflected his recognition of these new realities. “China’s international standing has risen as never before,” he noted, and the nation is “blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization.” Xi announced “a new era . . . that sees China moving closer to center stage and making greater contributions to mankind.” In previous speeches, he [suggested](#) boldly that China would become the new guarantor of the global trading order.

This, then, is the global story of our times. The creator, upholder and enforcer of the existing international system is withdrawing into self-centered isolation. The other great supporter and advocate of the open, rule-based world, Europe, has not been able to act assertively on the world stage with any clear vision or purpose and remains obsessed with the fate of its own continental project. Filling the power vacuum, a host of smaller, illiberal powers — Turkey, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia — are surging forward in their respective regions. But only China truly has the wherewithal and strategic prowess to potentially shape the next chapter of the story of our age.

A decade ago, I described a “[post-American world](#),” brought on not by the decline of the United States, but by the “rise of the rest.” That world is indeed coming to fruition because other countries are prospering, but the changes are being dramatically accelerated by the Trump administration’s foolish and self-defeating decision to abdicate the United States’ global influence — something that has taken more than 70 years to build. As the president might tweet, “Sad!”