

## The Pied Piper With No Mice? Blame Iraq

Ted Galen Carpenter

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An increasingly popular theme in the news media and the foreign policy community is that during Donald Trump's presidency, the United States has abandoned, lost, or perverted its global leadership role—with alarming consequences.

A July 26 article by the *Washington Post's* Dan Balz is merely the latest contribution to that school of thought. Balz asserts that “America's standing in the world is at a low ebb. Once described as the indispensable nation, the United States is now seen as withdrawn and inward-looking, a reluctant and unreliable partner at a dangerous moment for the world.” He adds that “President Trump shattered a 70-year consensus among U.S. presidents of both political parties that was grounded in the principle of robust American leadership in the world through alliances and multilateral institutions. For decades, this approach was seen at home and abroad as good for the world and good for the United States.”

The last statement is highly questionable on both counts. There were earlier episodes (the Vietnam and Iraq wars come readily to mind) when there was considerable domestic discontent about whether Washington's strategy was good for the United States. Populations in nations that have been the targets of U.S. ministrations over the decades, including North Korea, Iran, Guatemala, Vietnam, Lebanon, Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, also likely would dispute Balz's complacent view that U.S. global leadership has been good for them. Washington's sanctions, coups, foreign aid to corrupt dictators, and military interventions confirm that U.S. foreign policy frequently has been a train wreck causing great human suffering.

There is little question that on an array of issues, countries around the world, including longtime U.S. allies in Europe and East Asia, are showing noticeable reluctance to follow Washington's lead. That reaction has grown more frequent and intense during the Trump presidency, as I have pointed out with respect to issues such as withdrawing from the multilateral agreement regarding Iran's nuclear program, achieving greater burden-sharing within NATO and other alliances, and taking a more hardline stance regarding China's aggressive behavior.

But the resistance towards Washington's policy preferences have been growing for many years. Indeed, even during the Cold War, such foot-dragging emerged from time-to-time, despite the existence of a mutual security threat that fostered allied deference to the West's superpower protector. Moreover, much of the world was either under Soviet domination or clung to neutrality, so Washington's writ did not apply at all in those cases. The ability of the United

States to entice and cajole a majority of nations to support its policy initiatives actually seemed to peak in the years between the Persian Gulf War and the Iraq War. That period, which Charles Krauthammer memorably described as the “unipolar moment,” existed only because of the Soviet Union’s decline and demise, which enabled the United States to exercise an extraordinary degree of global dominance. The key term in Krauthammer’s formulation, though, was “moment.”

Even during the 1990s, the world was continuing to become more multipolar economically, and that process was accelerating. Soon, the signs of greater political and diplomatic independence would follow. When Secretary of State Madeleine Albright asserted in 1998 that America was the “indispensable nation,” the unipolar moment was at its zenith, and it would begin to fade. The arrogance and national narcissism of Albright’s stance matched or exceeded anything Donald Trump has voiced. Her statement that “we stand taller and see further than other countries into the future,” did not encourage collegial decision-making within the international community or imply U.S. respect for the views and interests of those “other countries.”

The leading NATO allies already were chafing at Washington’s policy dominance, and the push for an independent European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) within the European Union at the end of the 1990s reflected the desire for options outside a U.S.-dominated NATO. The 9-11 attacks short-circuited that campaign, and led to a closing of ranks to meet the alarming terrorist threat. But as George W. Bush’s administration broadened the response to 9-11 into a global “war on terror,” and used it as a pretext for forcible regime change in Iraq, allied enthusiasm for the policy waned. Several key NATO states, most notably Germany, declined to participate in the U.S.-led war to oust Saddam Hussein. Resistance to other Bush administration initiatives also emerged. When President Bush strongly pushed to give NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia, both France and Germany pushed back, firmly refusing to adopt that policy. President Obama found no greater enthusiasm that move, since Paris and Berlin correctly feared that it would needlessly provoke Russia.

The Bush and Obama administrations also encountered resistance from the East Asian allies, especially Japan and South Korea, when Washington sought to broaden the purpose of the bilateral security treaties with those countries into a coordinated, multilateral effort to deal with other contingencies in the Asian theater. Japanese and South Korean leaders especially worried that Obama’s “strategic pivot” to Asia might be the initial stage of an implicit containment policy directed against China, and they were wary of such a mission. They appreciated the security insurance that an alliance with the United States provided, but enlisting in an anti-China strategy was too high a premium.

Washington’s ability to get its way internationally has decreased during the Trump years, and the president’s abrasive style has played a role. But the notion that the United States has willingly “relinquished” or “abandoned” global leadership misses the mark. Even where the administration has taken a step back, it is primarily on peripheral matters, such as withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement and the UN Human Rights Council, and cutting ties with the World Health Organization. As fond as world governance advocates might be of such institutions, they are not central (or even terribly relevant) to strategic and geopolitical affairs. On most other matters, Washington’s activism (especially activism regarding security issues) is as great as ever.

The reluctance of other nations to bow to Washington’s policy wishes did not begin when Donald Trump took the oath of office, and the causes are much deeper than resentment at him or

his leadership style. Such policy independence reflects both the emergence of a more multipolar international system and the corollary that even America's closest allies recognize that their best interests do not always align with those of Washington. Again, the emergence of that recognition predates the Trump presidency, and it accurately reflects not just governmental policy but public opinion, especially in democratic states. A 2015 Pew Research Center survey found that nearly half of the respondents in several major European NATO countries opposed using force even to defend an alliance partner under attack. Yet that obligation is the core of Washington's long-standing European security policy. The widespread reluctance of European publics to abide by that policy was evident nearly 18 months before Trump took office.

It may be a comforting illusion for American advocates of an idealized, pre-Trump foreign policy to believe that once he leaves office, matters will return to "normal," and other nations will obediently follow America's supposedly enlightened global leadership. But that belief is an illusion. The world has changed in fundamental, structural ways that have little to do with Trump or his policies. In a more multipolar international system—one that has been gradually developing over several decades—countries have both the ability and inclination to pursue their own interests and not blindly defer to Washington's wishes. That pattern likely will continue and deepen no matter who occupies the White House.

*Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in security studies at the Cato Institute and a contributing editor at the American Conservative, is the author of 12 books and more than 850 articles on international affairs.*