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Commentary: Trump sparks a debate over the future of American power

Ishaan Tharoor

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President Donald Trump will retreat to his Florida resort at the end of this week. Nearing the halfway point of his term in office, his political isolation in Washington is deepening. A slew of candidates balked at taking the job of White House chief of staff - a post of tremendous influence that has in the age of Trump become a poisoned chalice from which few want to drink. A funding spat with the Democrats prompted Trump to vow a government shutdown, much to the chagrin of members of his own party. And the legal inquiries into the president's campaign and businesses are mounting.

It's not just Trump's domestic agenda that's facing scrutiny. Last week, Trump received a stinging bipartisan rebuke from Congress over his administration's embrace of the Saudi-led war in Yemen and the particularly reckless royal holding power in Riyadh. The high-profile climate meetings that took place in Poland only underscored the extent to which this White House has alienated itself from the international mainstream on environmental policy - and highlighted, yet again, how the rest of the world is plowing ahead in spite of Trump, not with him.

Of course, Trump came to power vowing to be a disrupter on the global stage. He said he was intent on reforming a post-World War II international order that had outlived its usefulness for Americans. But the White House's efforts overseas - including its rejection of the Paris climate accord, the waging of trade wars, the unraveling of the Iran nuclear deal, the persistent belittling of allies and the perplexing coddling of autocrats - have unsettled Washington as much as they have disturbed American partners abroad.

To be sure, discussions about the waning of the United States as the world's sole superpower predate Trump. But two years of his tumultuous presidency have intensified Washingtonian angst about the future of American power and how America should seek to lead a more fractured planet - or whether it should try at all.

"It's historical fact that great nations and empires all have a beginning and an end," said James Jones, a retired U.S. general, former national security adviser to President Barack Obama and outgoing chairman of the Atlantic Council, speaking Friday in Washington at a forum hosted by his think tank. "There's a naive belief in our country that there's some sort of destiny, that the primacy of the United States is ensured for some reason forever. I don't think that's the case."

To that end, the Atlantic Council, an organization deeply invested in the furtherance of American leadership, is planning on floating a new set of principles to safeguard the "rules-based order" - the euphemism often used to explain the status quo authored by the United States more than half a century ago. It wants to "revitalize" and "defend" this order, not just from the rising authoritarian might of China, but in the face of Trump's own nationalist and protectionist agenda and those of his ilk.

At the forum, speakers warned of the White House's disregard for "values-based" foreign policy - seen both in Trump's cynical accommodation of figures such as the Saudi crown prince as well as his demagoguery over migrants and refugees coming to the United States. Washington, they feared, was seeing its credibility evaporate among allies. This sentiment was echoed by Jake Sullivan, a former Obama administration official and Hillary Clinton adviser, in a recent essay outlining what a liberal, post-Trump foreign policy ought to look like.

"An energized, inspiring, and ultimately successful foreign policy must cut through Trump's false, dog-whistling choice between globalism and nationalism," wrote Sullivan. "It must combine the best kind of patriotism (a shared civic spirit and a clear sense of the national interest) and the best kind of internationalism (a recognition that when your neighbor's house is on fire, you need to grab a bucket). And it should reject the worst kind of nationalism (damn-the-consequences aggression and identity-based hate-mongering) and the worst kind of internationalism (the self-congratulatory insulation of the Davos elite)."

But that's a tricky needle to thread. On the right, Trump and his lieutenants have spent their time in power casting the liberal pieties of the Obama era as supposed obstacles to the American national interest and see themselves at the forefront of a nationalist wave taking control across the world.

Among the Democrats, there's a burgeoning debate about what kind of counter to "internationalism" ought to be embraced: It's easy to scorn the "Davos elite," but it's another thing to pursue policies that target the power and privileges of influential multinational corporations or question the shibboleths of free trade and laissez-faire capitalism. It's sensible to urge American restraint in the Middle East and other geopolitical flash points, but it's harder to convince official Washington to eschew new military entanglements.

And though Trump and his political rivals may not agree on much, both may succumb to the old temptations of the Cold War.

At the Atlantic Council's forum, the specter of China loomed over proceedings. Adm. Michael Rogers, a former head of the National Security Agency, feared China could outpace the United States in its abilities to wage cyberwarfare. Sen. Tom Cotton, R.-Ark., a figure largely loyal to Trump, described China as "a unique adversary in the world." Though Cotton's hawkish views on Iran have earned him many detractors, there aren't that many lawmakers on the other side of the aisle who would disagree with his antipathy toward Beijing.

That the United States is almost inexorably lurching into a great-power confrontation with China ought to be a concern, suggested Emma Ashford and Trevor Thrall of the libertarian Cato Institute. "The growing consensus on China is troubling. Having identified China as America's biggest strategic challenge, neither party has identified a clear goal," Ashford and Thrall wrote. "Nor have they articulated how a new approach to China would provide a foundation for a

broader vision of American foreign policy . . . The risk of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy on China - through confrontation without purpose - is real."

Analysts liken the febrile moment to an earlier era of 19th century politics, when Europe's industrializing, imperial powers entered into alliances that ultimately convulsed the world into conflict.

"What we are seeing today resembles the mid-nineteenth century in important ways: the post - World War II, post - Cold War order cannot be restored, but the world is not yet on the edge of a systemic crisis," wrote Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations.

A century ago, that crisis arrived. This time, the current crop of American politicians - Trump included - can still stave off calamity.

"Now is the time to make sure one never materializes, be it from a breakdown in U.S.-Chinese relations, a clash with Russia, a conflagration in the Middle East, or the cumulative effects of climate change," Haass continued. "The good news is that it is far from inevitable that the world will eventually arrive at a catastrophe; the bad news is that it is far from certain that it will not."