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Why American Leadership Still Matters

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A strong, bipartisan commitment to global leadership has informed America's foreign policy since we emerged from World War II. Today, however, the global architecture the United States has conceived, built, and maintained is in jeopardy. No one nation rivals the US on paper. But through both traditional and nontraditional means, nation-states and nonstate actors alike are presenting new challenges to international security that, if not addressed, will threaten the security, prosperity, and freedom of the United States and its allies.
At the same time, some Americans are questioning both our capacity to lead on the world stage and the wisdom of doing so. US engagement abroad, at its core, has always been about helping the American people, protecting US interests, and advancing US values. But ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, coupled with an uneven economic recovery, have led some at home to reassess the costs, effectiveness, and benefits of American global leadership.
This report reflects the fundamental consensus of our project's members that American global leadership is just as crucial to the security, prosperity, and freedom of the American people today as it was 70 years ago. US foreign policies must adapt to keep pace with the twisting dynamics of an ever-changing world but should be rooted in and united by a continued commitment to vigorous international engagement.
The security of the United States and its people is our first responsibility and serves as the raison d'être for active US engagement abroad. Although different circumstances require different approaches, active global military leadership is always a prerequisite to success. In the security realm, not only does US engagement—including the forward deployment of US troops—deter aggression, but in the event of conflict, it also enables the US to meet threats far from its shores quickly and in time to prevent losses that would be costly to regain.
US engagement abroad, however, constitutes far more than just military action. Too often, we tend to overlook America's crucial hand in waging peace, dampening rivalries, and helping to resolve conflict. We similarly tend to underappreciate the importance of some of the bedrock tools of international engagement including American diplomacy, foreign assistance, economic assistance, people-to-people programs, and public-private partnerships. These tools all help to ensure that military force remains an option of last resort.
The disparate aspects of American global leadership are, in fact, intimately connected and often mutually reinforcing. The genius of America's approach is that, no matter how one rearranges the pillars of American global leadership, the end result is positive.
What would the world look like without American global leadership? It is difficult to say, partly because we take so many of its benefits for granted and its dividends are dispersed. But global politics abhors a vacuum, and American retrenchment is sure to create one. There is simply no guarantee that whoever might fill our space would have the capacity, the inclination, or will to keep the world safe, markets open, and people free. If anything, an increasingly brazen China, revanchist Russia, volatile North Korea, and ruthless Islamic State collectively underscore the need for more, not less, American leadership abroad.
We believe that the ideas contained in the pages that follow offer a coherent, digestible and refreshing way to think and talk about American global leadership in the modern era. We must not wait for events to remake the case for American global leadership. We must make that case ourselves today.

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