

America Is Now a Rogue Superpower

Robert Kagan

Whenever and however America's war with Iran ends, it has both exposed and exacerbated the dangers of our new, fractured, multipolar reality—driving deeper wedges between the United States and former friends and allies; strengthening the hands of the expansionist great powers, Russia and China; accelerating global political and economic chaos; and leaving the United States weaker and more isolated than at any time since the 1930s. Even success against Iran will be hollow if it hastens the collapse of the alliance system that for eight decades has been the true source of America's power, influence, and security.

For America's friends and allies in Europe, the Iran war has been a significant strategic setback. As Russia and Ukraine wage a grinding war that will be “won” by whoever can hold on the longest, the Iran war has materially and psychologically helped Russia and hurt Ukraine. Even before Donald Trump lifted oil sanctions on Russia, oil prices were skyrocketing—and filling Vladimir Putin's war chest with billions of dollars, just as Russia's wartime deficits were starting to cause significant pain. The unexpected windfall gives Putin more time and capacity to continue destroying Ukraine's economic infrastructure and energy grid. Meanwhile, the Persian Gulf states are burning through U.S.-provided stocks of air-defense interceptors, drawing on the same limited supply that Ukraine depends on to defend its largest cities from Russian missile strikes.

More worrying for European allies has been the evident indifference of the United States to the consequences of its actions. For Europeans, the existential threat today comes not from a weakened and impoverished Iran but from a nuclear-armed Russia that invaded Ukraine in the most brazen act of cross-border territorial aggression in Europe since World War II. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth told the Europeans last year to be ready by 2027 to defend themselves without American help, and so they have been desperately reorienting their economies and military strategies to take on the Russian threat without the United States. They have also taken on the bulk of military and economic support for Ukraine because they fear, as many American analysts do, that Putin's territorial ambitions are extensive, and other European states may be next. Trump's decision to lift sanctions on Russian oil, over the opposition of Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, and the European Union, showed just how little regard the United States has for Europe's security. The message to Europe, as the scholar Ivan Krastev [has noted](#), is that “the trans-Atlantic relationship no longer matters.”

U.S. actions have been no less damaging to America's friends and allies in East Asia and the Western Pacific. Japan gets 95 percent of its oil from the Middle East, and 70 percent of that passes through the now-blocked Strait of Hormuz. Yet Japanese and other Asian diplomats in the first weeks of the war [complained](#) that they were “not receiving any communication from the Trump administration.” At the same time, the United States has dispatched an aircraft-carrier battle group and other warships from the Western Pacific to the Persian Gulf, including elements of the [Tripoli amphibious ready group](#), that would be needed for an American response to Chinese aggression, including an attack on Taiwan.

Trump's supporters have tried to argue that the war with Iran will “[boost deterrence](#)” against Russia and China by demonstrating that “a direct confrontation with the U.S. would be [extraordinarily damaging](#).” Given that the United States remains the world's strongest nuclear-armed power, that is likely not a revelation to Moscow and Beijing. Yet nothing about Trump's willingness to bomb Iran suggests that he's any more prone than before to seek a “direct confrontation” with Russia. On the contrary, Trump has consistently sought to appease Putin by cutting off direct supplies of U.S. weaponry to Ukraine, pressuring Ukraine to give in to Russian territorial demands, and now by lifting sanctions on Russian oil.

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As for China, combined Israeli and American forces have demonstrated impressive capabilities, but their success is not necessarily replicable in the Pacific. Taking out an adversary's sophisticated air defenses is a dangerous operation—one that Israel shouldered in Iran, making the subsequent U.S. assault possible. The U.S. had the capacity to take that first step but would not likely have assumed the risk. In the event of Chinese aggression against Taiwan, will the Israelis take out Chinese air-defense systems for the United States too?

Chinese leaders will also note that the United States has been fearful of sending warships to open the Strait of Hormuz lest they come under fire from a significantly depleted Iranian force. That's understandable but not very intimidating.

Hegseth has said that “the only thing prohibiting transit in the straits right now is Iran shooting at shipping.” No doubt, and the only thing preventing the United States from coming to the aid of Taiwan will be China shooting, with far superior and far more plentiful weaponry. Also not lost on the Chinese is the fact that the United States has had to pull significant air, naval, and ground forces from the Western Pacific, likely for months, in order to fight a decimated Iran.

Some [analysts have suggested](#) that Russia and China have failed to come to Iran’s defense, and that this somehow constitutes a defeat for them, because Iran was their ally. But the Russians are helping Iran by providing satellite imagery and advanced drone capabilities to strike more effectively at U.S. military and support installations. And China has not suffered a loss in Iran insofar as Iran has granted safe passage to its oil shipments.

More important, in Russia and China’s hierarchy of interests, defending Iran is of distinctly secondary importance; their primary goal is to expand their regional hegemony. For Putin, Ukraine is the big prize that will immeasurably strengthen Russia’s position vis-à-vis the rest of Europe. For China, the primary goal is to push the United States out of the Western Pacific, and anything that degrades America’s ability to project force in the region is a benefit. Indeed, the longer American attention and resources are tied up in the Middle East, the better for both Russia and China. Neither Moscow nor Beijing can be unhappy to see the war drive deep and perhaps permanent wedges between the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia.

The Trump administration, however, has turned America’s long-standing hierarchy of interests upside down. For eight decades, Americans were deeply involved in the greater Middle East not because the region was intrinsically a vital national-security interest but as part of a broader global commitment to the alliances and freedom of navigation that undergirded the American-led liberal world order.



Smoke rises over a Tehran highway on March 5. (Atta Kenare / AFP / Getty)

No state in the Middle East (including Iraq in 2003 and Iran today) ever posed a direct threat to the security of the American homeland. Iran has no missiles that can reach the United States and, according to American intelligence, would not until 2035. Access to Middle Eastern oil and gas has never been essential to the security of the American homeland. Today the United States is less dependent on Middle Eastern energy than in the past, which Trump has pointed out numerous times since the Strait of Hormuz was closed.

The United States has long sought to prevent Iraq or Iran from acquiring weapons of mass destruction, but not because these countries would pose a direct threat to the United States. The American nuclear arsenal would have been more than adequate to deter a first strike by either of them, as it has been for decades against far more powerful adversaries. What American administrations have feared is that an Iran in possession of nuclear weapons would be more difficult to contain in its region, because neither the United States nor Israel would be able to launch the kind of attack now under way. The Middle East’s security, not America’s, would be imperiled.

As for Israel, the United States committed to its defense out of a sense of moral responsibility after the Holocaust. This never had anything to do with American national-security interests. In fact, American officials from the beginning regarded support for Israel as contrary to U.S. interests. [George C. Marshall](#) opposed recognition in 1948, and [Dean Acheson](#) said that by recognizing Israel, the United States had succeeded Britain as “the most disliked power in the Middle East.” During the Cold War, even supporters of Israel [acknowledged](#) that as a simple matter of “power politics,” the United States had “every reason for wishing that Israel had never come into existence.” But as Harry Truman put it, the decision to support the state of Israel was made “not in the light of oil, but in the light of justice.”

Even the threat of terrorism from the region was a consequence of American involvement, not the reason for it. Had the United States not been deeply and consistently involved in the Muslim world since the 1940s, Islamic militants would have little interest in attacking an indifferent nation 5,000 miles and two oceans away. Contrary to much mythology, they have hated us not so much because of “who we are” but because of where we are. In Iran’s case, the United States was deeply involved in its politics from the 1950s until the 1979 revolution, including as the main supporter of the brutal regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The surest way of avoiding Islamist terrorist attacks would have been to get out.

America’s interests in the Middle East have always been indirect and secondary to larger global aims and strategies. During World War II, the United States led a coalition of nations that depended on the greater Middle East for oil and strategic position. During the Cold War, the United States assumed responsibility not only for the defense of the Jewish state but for the defense and economic well-being of European and Asian allies who depended on Middle Eastern oil. After the Cold War, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq invaded Kuwait, and the George H. W. Bush administration believed that failing to reverse that aggression would set an ominous precedent in the aborning “new world order.”

That sense of global responsibility is precisely what the Trump administration came to office to repudiate and undo. The Trump administration’s new National Security Strategy, which has dramatically shifted the focus of American policy from world order to homeland security and hemispheric hegemony, appropriately downgraded the Middle East in the hierarchy of American concerns. A United States concerned only with defense of its homeland and the Western Hemisphere would see nothing in the region worth fighting for. In the heyday of “America First” foreign policy during the 1920s and ’30s, when Americans did not regard even Europe and Asia as vital interests, the idea that they had any security interests in the greater Middle East would have struck them as hallucinatory.

Yet now, for reasons known only to the Trump administration, the Middle East has suddenly taken top priority; indeed, to supporters of Trump and the war, it seems to be the only priority, apparently worth any price, including the introduction of ground forces and even the destruction of the American alliance system.

This might make sense if there were no other threats to worry about. When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, the greatest perceived menace was from international terrorism. China was in an accommodating phase, under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. Russia posed no threat to Europe; rather, these were the years of Russo-German partnership, a time when Western Europeans found the overall strategic situation so unthreatening that they were the ones doubting the necessity of NATO. Only Eastern Europeans still worried about the return of a revanchist Russia, which is why they immediately joined the United States in the Iraq War.

Twenty-three years later, the situation is completely different. The greatest threats to world peace, and to the democracies of Europe and Asia, are not terrorism and Iran but two powerful and expansionist great powers, one of which has already invaded its neighbors and the other of which threatens to. Today’s world looks more like that of 1934 than like the supposedly post-historical paradise that some imagined after the Cold War. And European and American leaders are at odds not over philosophical disagreements about the utility of power but over fundamental security interests. American indifference to the European struggle against Russian aggression constitutes a profound geopolitical revolution—perhaps the final disintegration of the alliance relationships established after World War II.

One would be hard-pressed to find any nation in the world that has been reassured by the Israeli and American war against Iran, other than Israel itself. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, Gulf state leaders are “[privately furious](#)” with the U.S. for “triggering a war that put them in the crosshairs.” Despite its impressive power, the United States was unable to protect these countries from Iran’s attacks; now they have to hope that Trump will not leave them to face a weakened yet intact and angry Iranian regime but will instead double down on America’s long-term military commitment to the region, [including by putting ground troops in Iran](#).

Israelis should also be asking how far they can count on the Americans’ dedication to this fight. A United States capable of abandoning long-standing allies in Europe and East Asia will be capable of abandoning Israel too. Can Israel sustain its new dominance in the region without a long and deep American commitment?

The unintended effect of the war, in fact, may be driving regional players to seek other great-power protectors in addition to the United States. Trump himself has invited the Chinese to help open the strait, and the Chinese are actively courting the Arab and Gulf states. The Gulf states are not averse to dealing with Beijing and Moscow. Neither is Israel. It sold management of a container terminal in the port of Haifa to a Chinese company, despite objections from the U.S. Navy, which uses the port.

Israel, practically alone among American allies, refused to take part in sanctions against Russia when it invaded Ukraine in 2022. When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ran for reelection in 2019, some of his campaign posters showed him shaking hands with Putin under the tagline [A Different League](#). No one should blame Israelis for this. They are an independent nation and can be expected to do what they feel they need to do to survive. Americans may have a sentimental or religious attachment to Israel, but Israelis cannot afford to be sentimental in return.

That is especially true given this administration's cavalier attitude toward international responsibilities. The Iran war is global intervention "America First"—style: no public debate, no vote in Congress, no cooperation or, in many cases, even consultation with allies other than Israel, and, apparently, no concern for potential consequences to the region and the world. "They say if you break it, you own it. I don't buy that," Senator Lindsey Graham, arguably Trump's most influential adviser on the war, [said](#).

For Europeans, the problem is worse than American disregard and irresponsibility. They now face an unremittingly hostile United States—one that no longer treats its allies as allies or differentiates between allies and potential adversaries. The aggressive tariffs Washington imposed last year hit America's erstwhile friends at least as hard as they hit Russia and China, and in some cases harder. Europeans must now wonder whether Trump's decision to go to war with Iran makes it more or less likely that he will take similarly bold action on Greenland. The risks and costs of taking that undefended Danish territory, after all, would be far less than the risks and costs of waging the present war. Not some EU liberal but Trump's conservative friend, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni recently [warned](#) that American actions have produced a "crisis in international law and multilateral organizations" and "the collapse of a shared world order."

This is the world we are now living in. Anti-Americanism is on the rise in formerly allied countries. Asked in a recent [Politico poll](#) whether Xi Jinping's China or Trump's United States was more dependable, 57 percent of Canadians, 40 percent of Germans, and 42 percent of Britons said China—a sharp [decline](#) in America's perceived [trustworthiness](#). In the past, America's alliance relationships have survived waves of public disapproval because governments knew that whatever errors the United States made and however unpopular Washington might be, it remained fully committed to defending the order that protected them. Today that is no longer true.

[Read: Trump is right that Pax Americana is over](#)

Trump has repeatedly made clear, including during this war, that if he is unhappy with an ally, he will withdraw American protection. He temporarily cut off intelligence sharing with Ukraine to punish it for refusing to bend to Moscow. He has warned that allies such as Japan and South Korea should pay the United States for protection. During this war, he has threatened to leave the Strait of Hormuz closed and hand the problem off to those who need it more than the United States does. Trump's tactics with allies consist almost entirely of threats: to tariff them, to abandon them, and, in the case of Greenland, to use force to seize their territory. When Trump discovered that he needed the help of allies against Iran, he did not ask them for help or work to persuade them. He simply "demanded" that they do what he said. Trump doesn't want allies—he wants vassals.

As a result, friends and allies will be ever less willing to cooperate with the United States. This time, Spain refused American use of air and naval bases in its territory. Next time, that could be Germany, Italy, or even Japan. Nations around the world will come to rely not on American commitments and permanent alliances but on ad hoc coalitions to address crises. No one will cooperate with the United States by choice, only by coercion. Without allies, the United States will have to depend on clients that it controls, such as Venezuela, or weaker powers that it can bully.



President Trump with NATO leaders in Washington, D.C., August 2025. (Win McNamee / Getty)

For 80 years, the United States defied the closest thing there is to a law of physics in international relations: the concept of balancing. The seminal realist thinker Kenneth Waltz once [observed](#) that “unbalanced power, whoever wields it, is a potential danger to others.” This certainly should have applied to the United States, because the global distribution of power for eight decades after the end of World War II was highly “unbalanced” in America’s favor. Yet neither in the 1940s nor after the Cold War did the world’s other powers even consider banding together to balance against the American hegemon. Rather than regarding history’s first global “superpower” as a danger to be contained, they for the most part saw it as a partner to be enlisted.

Americans were not unerring stewards of world affairs. They could be selfish, self-righteous, paranoid, aggressive, and blundering, as well as indifferent and ignorant. They could be too confident about the scope of their power, and then too pessimistic about the possibilities of its use—in other words, Americans were not exceptional, even if their nation’s geopolitical circumstances were. Yet throughout the Cold War and for nearly four decades after it, allies and partners across the globe clung to the American order through thick and thin. It survived unpopular wars in Vietnam and Iraq. It survived made-in-America global economic calamities, such as the 2008 financial crisis. It even survived America’s relative economic and military decline. In fact, America’s great power was more than tolerated and forgiven: Other nations encouraged it, abetted it, and, with surprising frequency, legitimized it through multilateral institutions such as NATO and the United Nations, as well as in less formal coalitions. This, more than raw might, was what made the United States the most influential power in history.

Those days are now over and will not soon return. Nations that once bandwagoned with the United States will now remain aloof or align against it—not because they want to, but because the United States leaves them no choice, because it will neither protect them nor refrain from exploiting them. Welcome to the era of the rogue American superpower. It will be lonely and dangerous.