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What America Should Do to Become Great Again

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Last March 4, U.S. President Donald Trump delivered a speech to a joint session of Congress, titled “The Renewal of the American Dream.” In his speech, President Trump vowed to impose high tariffs on major trading partners, eliminate subsidies for foreign semiconductor chipmakers who had set up operations in the United States, take over the Panama Canal and Greenland, implement tough anti-immigration policies, and seek the early resolution of key regional conflicts. President Trump argued that these measures would “Make America Great Again” by ending inflation, boosting employment, and contributing to national security. However, it remains questionable whether this will happen.

First of all, international confidence in U.S. leadership is declining as distrust and dissatisfaction with the Trump administration’s foreign policy increase. According to a Pew Research poll conducted between January and April 2025 across 24 countries, more than half of respondents in 19 of those countries expressed low confidence in U.S. global leadership under the Trump administration. U.S. allies were no exception. When asked, “How much confidence do you have in U.S. President Donald Trump to handle international affairs?” 62% of respondents in the United Kingdom, 78% in France, and 81% in Germany responded negatively, all of which are NATO members. The pattern was similar in the Indo-Pacific region, where 61% in Japan, 67% in South Korea, and 77% in Australia expressed distrust. In the case of Mexico, which is currently in a trade war with the United States, 91% of respondents distrusted President Trump’s foreign policy.

Compared to the same survey conducted during the Biden administration in 2024, trust in U.S. foreign policy increased in only five countries, including South Africa, India, Israel, Nigeria, and Turkey, although it was only by a small margin. An American commentator recently wrote an op-ed in the New York Times, titled “Trump’s America is Beginning to

Look More Like China,” criticizing the Trump administration for “democratic erosion, the fixation on strong borders, and the curbing of free speech.”

In April 2025, at the BRICS Foreign Ministers Meeting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi sharply criticized the United States as a “bully,” stating that “the United States, which has long benefited enormously from the free trade, is now going so far as to use tariffs as a bargaining chip to demand exorbitant prices from all countries. If one chooses to remain silent, compromise, and cower, it will only make the bully want to push his luck more.” In the past, few countries in the liberal order would have sympathized with these remarks. Now, however, the situation has changed. Mark Wolf, chief economics commentator at the Financial Times, a British newspaper, condemned the Trump administration’s attempt to compromise with Russia over the Ukraine war in February, declaring that “the United States is now the enemy of the West.”

The Trump administration may think that it does not matter if America’s international reputation is tarnished and its global leadership is called into doubt, as long as it serves U.S. interests. However, the Trump administration’s track record after six months in office has been far from satisfactory. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) in May rose 2.4% compared to the same month last year, suggesting that the impact of the U.S.-led “tariff war” on inflation has not yet been significant. However, experts predict that the repercussions will be considerable if so-called “reciprocal” tariffs are imposed in earnest. The U.S. Automatic Data Processing (ADP) National Employment Report found that private sector employment in June fell by 33,000 jobs compared to the previous month, marking the first decline since March 2023. Many economists in the United States are concerned that the Trump administration’s economic policies could potentially harm both the U.S. and global economies. Despite ongoing talks with Russia to bring the Russian invasion of Ukraine to a conclusion, the war continues, drawing criticism that it is only focused on behind-the-scenes deals between the great powers. Domestic divisions are also significant, as evidenced by the deployment of the U.S. National Guard and Marine Corps to crack down on the June domestic protests triggered by the crackdown on illegal immigrants.

The greatest source of American stability and prosperity today has been the international order led by the United States. The open trading system and liberal international order established after the Second World War guaranteed America’s prosperity and development, which held back the spread of communism and ended the Cold War with a victory for the West. The more the United States damages the very international order it created, the more the cost will squarely fall on the United States itself. The criticisms mentioned earlier by Wang Yi are a calculated challenge to the U.S.-led liberal international order. Should U.S. leadership remain absent, authoritarian forces such as China and Russia will try to fill the void. Some allies may even try to compromise with them as part of a broader strategic balancing act. For instance, Spain’s Prime Minister Sánchez has declared, “China is an important partner for the European Union.” Although the Trump administration has pledged

to focus on competing with China, the U.S. leadership vacuum is paradoxically creating a strategic environment favorable to China.

The Trump administration is losing credibility due to its frequent backflipping and disparagement of allies and partners. This could remain an obstacle to the restoration of U.S. global standing even in a post-Trump era. President Trump has repeatedly reneged on his own statements on various international issues, including the “tariff war.” For example, he announced an executive order in April imposing a universal 10% tariff on all countries, along with additional reciprocal tariffs for individual countries, only to “postpone” these measures until July 8. He also hinted during the negotiations that he might raise reciprocal tariffs on Japanese goods from the current 24% to 30-35%, citing that he is dissatisfied with Japan’s response.

Regarding South Korea-U.S. relations, President Trump said in his address to Congress in March that South Korea was not making contributions that match U.S. goodwill, saying, “South Korea’s average tariff is four times higher [...] And we give so much help militarily and in so many other ways to South Korea.” However, South Korea has served as the free world’s bulwark, preventing authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China, which have dominated the vast Eurasian continent, from taking over the Korean Peninsula using North Korea. As a result, the stability of the Indo-Pacific region and U.S. interests were able to be safeguarded.

Trump administration officials have also crossed the line beyond insulting allies. President Trump has called South Koreans “terrible people” and mocked the Canadian Prime Minister as the “Governor” of “the 51st state.” In response to French calls for the Statue of Liberty to be returned, his Press Secretary remarked that the French “should be grateful they’re not speaking German.” These comments make the United States no longer a respected leader but an object of fear and distrust.

President Trump considers allies not as partners for cooperation but as targets for “deals.” He is pursuing policies that demand major increases in defense cost-sharing, which could practically dismantle alliances. He demanded that NATO member states spend 5% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defense, and did not hesitate to say that if they did not comply, the United States would not honor its collective defense commitments. President Trump has also demanded that South Korea pay \$10 billion annually to host United States Forces Korea (USFK), and even mentioned the possibility of reducing troops, which could destabilize a core pillar of stability in Northeast Asia. President Trump wants allies like South Korea and Japan to invest in diverse economic development programs, including the Alaska Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) pipeline project. However, it is questionable whether allies would undertake large-scale investments when trust in the United States is deteriorating due to its denigration of alliances, weakening security commitments, and reduced inbound investment incentives.

The United States is degenerating from the leader of the free world into an agent of chaos undermining international norms. Left unchecked, the United States will diminish into a shabby renegade instead of becoming great again. If President Trump really wants to make America great again, the first thing he should do is to restore America's global leadership, which can be achieved by abandoning American-style unilateralism. Rather than unilaterally pressuring allies and partners that do not meet his self-imposed standards, he should open his eyes and ears to listen and respect differing opinions, both domestically and internationally. Instead of complaining that allies do not pay their fair share and threatening to withdraw security commitments, he should engage in discussions to identify which alternatives can maximize mutual benefits for both the United States and its allies. President Trump should seek solutions that respect the principles of comparative advantage and free trade, rather than just emphasizing the U.S. trade deficit.

Based on respect for and commitment to protecting the U.S.-led liberal international order, the United States should encourage the voluntary participation of allies and reclaim its status as a "values leader." As Joseph Nye, a prominent international politics scholar, pointed out, the United States became a superpower not only because of its "hard power" but, more importantly, because of its "soft power" centered on values and institutions. The Trump administration should remember that the United States became great because it was perceived as the defender of the liberal international order, defined by democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and market economy. The United States must now clearly state its commitment to re-establishing that role. In order to do so, the United States should not only pursue its national interests, but should also willingly assume the responsibility of providing "global public goods" for all humanity. Furthermore, it should show its leadership in addressing global challenges like threats to democracy, international health, climate change, cybersecurity, and supply chain stability.

It is now time for the United States to resist the temptation to exploit bargaining leverage through unpredictable and coercive policies. The United States can once more become a confident and transparent partner that earns "fear and respect" rather than "fear and contempt." Without a dominant global power, the international order will descend into chaos, and the United States will also suffer the consequences. Indeed, it has already learned the lessons of the Kindleberger Trap during the Great Depression in the 1930s and the Second World War in the 1940s. Only once it moves beyond short-term transactions and profit-seeking to embrace a long-term vision and sense of community can the United States prevent such risks and truly make America great again.