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The United States Must Be the World's Policeman

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Only America has the material and moral greatness to stop the slide into chaos and foster peace

By Anders Fogh Rasmussen

Barely had I been seated before Vladimir Putin told me that NATO—the organization that I then headed—no longer had any purpose and should be disbanded. “After the end of the Cold War, we dissolved the Warsaw Pact,” he said. “Similarly, you should dissolve NATO. That is a relic from the Cold War.”

During my visit to Moscow in December 2009, I sensed that President Putin was challenging the world order that the U.S. created so successfully after World War II. Beginning in 2014, he invaded Ukraine and launched a military action in Syria.

From my former positions as prime minister of Denmark and secretary-general of NATO, I know how important American leadership is. We desperately need a U.S. president who is able and willing to lead the free world and counter autocrats like President Putin. A president who will lead from the front, not from behind.

The world needs such a policeman if freedom and prosperity are to prevail against the forces of oppression, and the only capable, reliable and desirable candidate for the position is the United States. The presidential elections thus come at a pivotal point in history.

The Middle East is torn by war. In North Africa, Libya has collapsed and become a breeding ground for terrorists. In Eastern Europe, a resurgent Russia has brutally attacked and grabbed land by force from Ukraine. China is flexing its muscles against its neighbors—and the rogue state of North Korea is threatening a nuclear attack.

In this world of interconnections, it has become a cliché to talk about the “global village.” But right now, the village is burning, and the neighbors are fighting in the light of the flames. Just as we need a policeman to restore order; we need a firefighter to put out the flames of conflict, and a kind of mayor, smart and sensible, to lead the rebuilding.

Only America can play all these roles, because of all world powers, America alone has the credibility to shape sustainable solutions to these challenges. Russia is obsessed with rebuilding the empire the Soviet Union lost. China is still primarily a regional actor. Europe is weak, divided and leaderless. The old powers of Britain and France are simply too small and exhausted to play the global role they once did.

This is not simply about means. It is also about morality. Just as only America has the material greatness to stop the slide into chaos, only America has the moral greatness to do it—not for the sake of power, but for the sake of peace.

Yet the U.S. will only be able to shape the solutions the world needs if its leaders act with conviction. When America retrenches and retreats—if the world even thinks that American restraint reflects a lack of willingness to engage in preventing and resolving conflicts—it leaves a vacuum that will be filled by crooked autocrats across the world.

The Obama administration’s reluctance to lead the world has had serious consequences, and none is graver than the behavior of Mr. Putin. While Europe and the U.S. slept, he launched a ruthless military operation in support of the Assad regime in Syria and tried to present Russia as a global power challenging the U.S. in importance. In Europe, he is trying to carve out a sphere of influence and establish Russia as a regional power capable of diminishing American influence.

These are only a few examples of what is now at stake as autocrats, terrorists and rogue states challenge America’s leadership of the international rules-based order—which was created after World War II and which secured for the world an unprecedented period of peace, progress and prosperity.

The next president must acknowledge this inheritance. American isolationism will not make the U.S. and other freedom-loving countries safer and more prosperous, it will make them less so and unleash a plague of dictators and other oppressors. Above all, American isolationism will threaten the future of the rules-based international world order that has brought freedom and prosperity to so many people.

Mr. Rasmussen, a former prime minister of Denmark and a former secretary-general of NATO, is the author of “The Will to Lead—America’s Indispensable Role in the Global Fight For Freedom,” out this month from HarperCollins/Broadside Books.

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