

America the Fearful: Visions of Decline Are a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

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President Trump’s recent military adventures seem driven less by confidence and canny strategy than by fear of America losing status on the world stage, including in the Middle East.

Shortly after U.S. special forces raided Caracas in early January, Stephen Miller, the White House deputy chief of staff, offered a blunt justification. “You can talk all you want about international niceties,” he said, “but we live in a world, in the real world...that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power.” This ethos increasingly appears to characterize President Trump’s broader foreign policy, which threatens or even employs force wherever and whenever the president, unconstrained by norms or alliances, so chooses. Moved by the news of protesters being killed in Iran, Trump threatened military strikes. Seized by a desire to possess the Danish territory of Greenland, he brandished the possibility of tariffs and military force again. On the surface, the United States under Trump seems the very picture of a confident and capricious hegemon, tapping its unrivaled power to deter and coerce. But U.S. actions and inconsistent explanations have left many around the world alarmed and bewildered. Rather than aim his coercion at great-power peers, Trump has targeted weak adversaries and even allies. His motive for doing so lies neither in an overweening confidence nor in canny strategy. It comes instead from fear: of a loss of status on the world stage and of the decline of American power relative to that possessed by other states. There are reasons to worry that the United States is falling behind in key measures of power. But many of the concerning trends remain reversible...

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