

What If the Big Challenges to U.S. Global Leadership Aren't Coming From U.S. Voters?

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



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The right question is not whether Americans still believe in U.S. global leadership, but whether policymakers do -- and, if so, how they plan to restore it.

At various points in recent years, and certainly during the presidential campaign, it has seemed as though the U.S. is turning inward. Many foreign policy analysts (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2016/10/13/despite-what-trump-and-clinton-say-americans-want-the-u-s-to-be-a-global-leader/>) were relieved (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/14/trump-is-an-outlier-and-the-data-prove-it-trade-united-states-immigration-clinton-election/>) at the findings of the latest Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey (https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/ccgasurvey2016_america_age_uncertainty.pdf) of U.S. public opinion, which found, contrary to this narrative of creeping isolationism, that large majorities believe the U.S. remains the world's most powerful country and should exercise global leadership.

Yet that result may be misleading. A Pew Research Center poll (<http://www.people-press.org/2016/05/05/8-perceptions-of-u-s-global-power-and-respect/>) conducted in April echoes the Chicago Council's broad findings but also found that Americans believe U.S. global importance is diminishing (if still formidable). The sentiment is not partisan: The numbers of Republicans, Democrats, and independents who feel that U.S. prestige is growing are all smaller than they were seven years ago.

This adds up to a view, seemingly pervasive during this election cycle, that the U.S. is and should remain powerful but is headed in the wrong direction. How to make sense of such anxiety?

Much of the talk about U.S. global leadership refers to what foreign policy scholars term "American primacy (http://belfercenter.hks.harvard.edu/publication/25123/american_hegemony_or_american_primacy.html)."

Primacy doesn't mean domination, nor does it imply that the U.S. can do whatever it pleases globally. It stems from the U.S. role in global affairs being qualitatively greater than that of other world powers.

Put simply, American primacy arises from four related factors: U.S. power, the power of other states, the international order of which the U.S. is leader, and the U.S. willingness to lead. By any of these measures, American primacy has taken a hit in recent years.

The power of states in international relations depends heavily on the size of their economy and the strength of their military. There are reasons for Americans to be concerned on both counts. The U.S. economy has recovered slowly (http://belfercenter.hks.harvard.edu/publication/25123/american_hegemony_or_american_primacy.html) from the last recession, with GDP growth well below historical norms. And many defense analysts have argued that U.S. military readiness is lagging (<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/438982/us-military-readiness-david-petraeus-wrong-its-crisis>) as a result of sequestration and other missteps (though some think this concern is overstated (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-myth-of-a-u-s-military-readiness-crisis-1470783221>)).

Meanwhile, the power of other states and the threat they pose is increasing. While China's economic prowess is often overestimated (<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/chinas-great-stagnation-18073>), its economy now rivals that of the U.S. China's military is modernizing (<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/just-how-strong-will-chinas-military-be-2025-13244>) and in some respects may be comparable to the U.S. (<http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-us-militarys-greatest-fear-russia-china-are-catching-16242>). Russia's economy has reeled from sanctions and low oil prices (<http://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2016/07/13/13/05/NA071316-Russia-Adjusting-to-Lower-Oil-Prices>), yet Moscow too has upgraded its military forces (<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/pay-attention-america-russia-is-upgrading-its-military/>). This means that while U.S. power is not declining, this country's relative advantage over others is shrinking. And the willingness of states from Europe to Asia to challenge the status quo is also rising.

U.S. primacy also flows from being the leading free-market democracy in a world dominated by them. A state whose political or economic system was fundamentally different, even if it were powerful, would find its path to primacy challenging. Still, there are signs that the liberal order the U.S. leads is under pressure. The spread of democracy has stagnated since 2006 (http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Diamond-26-1_0.pdf), trade agreements (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2016/07/18/political-opposition-to-trade-deals-the-republican-platform-and-the-facts/>) have stalled, and trade itself has stopped rising (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/31/upshot/a-little-noticed-fact-about-trade-its-no-longer-rising.html>).

As the liberal international order has stumbled, challenges have risen: from the Russian annexation of Crimea to China's island-building and defiance of the Hague tribunal in the South China Sea. The U.S. and its allies have often not helped, extolling but neglecting to enforce norms such as that against the use of chemical weapons, or to update and strengthen key institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations, much less the liberal order more broadly.

If there is a firm takeaway from the Chicago Council report, it is that the fourth factor -- U.S. willingness to lead -- remains healthy. Some 64% of respondents -- including a slim majority of supporters of Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump -- felt the U.S. should take an active role in world affairs. Willingness to lead is on the upswing. The Pew poll revealed that 43% of Americans believe the U.S. should "mind its own business internationally" -- down from a historic high of 52% in 2013.

This suggests that the right question is not whether Americans still believe in U.S. global leadership but whether policy makers do, given their muted responses to challenges to U.S. primacy -- and, if so, how they plan to restore it.

Michael Singh is the managing director and Lane-Swig Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the Wall Street Journal blog '[Think Tank](http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2016/11/03/what-if-the-big-challenges-to-u-s-global-leadership-arent-coming-from-u-s-voters/)' (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2016/11/03/what-if-the-big-challenges-to-u-s-global-leadership-arent-coming-from-u-s-voters/>). " ❖

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