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## The Divided West and the Rising East

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### Abstract

This paper draws attention to some of the consequences of the decline and possible slump of the liberal world order, while focusing predominantly on factors that have divided the Western world, most notably the toxic rise of nationalism, nativism, populism, authoritarianism, anti-institutionalism, anti-immigrant, and anti-globalization sentiments. We argue, that as the United States further embraces economic nationalism and protectionism under the Trump administration, the support for multilateral institutions, rooted in the liberal order, is likely to significantly retreat. The dissolution of the liberal order will arguably pave the way for political disorder across the globe, while at the same time dividing the Western world at a time when an economically resurgent China, in a strategic alliance with a more assertive Russia under Putin, is likely to pose new challenges to the West. Their rivalries notwithstanding, both Beijing and Moscow are likely to seek ways to improve their bilateral relations with Washington in order to curtail and better manage regional and global tensions. It is worth noting that the risks of abandoning a liberal world order, which for more than seven decades has espoused relative prosperity, as well as a legal and institutional framework for conflict resolution, may prove to be enormously damaging and consequential.

### Keywords

Nationalism, Populism, Divided West, Rising East, World Liberal Order

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## **Introduction**

The post-war liberal global system is in danger of crumbling and we now live in a deeply uncertain time—a time in which international relations is marked by deeper divisions, polarization, narrow nationalism, and virulent populist politics and protests. An intensifying and fast-growing refugee and migration crisis has posed a serious challenge to liberal norms regarding tolerance and diversity. More challenging, and even far more destabilizing, however, is the loss of the United States as an aspiring supporter of such a global order.<sup>(1)</sup>

The post-War liberal order, as one expert points out, is displaying signs of decline if not collapse. Authoritarianism is on the rise in many parts of the world, including China, Russia, the Philippines, Turkey, and Eastern Europe. The World Trade Organization (WTO) has failed to deal with non-tariff barriers and the theft of intellectual property. The United States' weaponization of finance and its tendency to exploit the power of dollar to impose, at times, unilateral sanction as well as its overuse of tariffs has caused resentment around the world. At home, concern over the country's accumulation of debt has grown significantly over the past decade or so.<sup>(2)</sup>

The UN Security Council has faced many difficult challenges—including confronting genocide—with a meager degree of success. The composition of the UN Security Council bears little resemblance to the real distribution of power in the changing world. Increasing fracture in the Western norms and values are manifested in the reality that such entities as the European Union (EU) has yet to build a consensus over migration and sovereignty issues.<sup>(3)</sup> Moreover, many European countries, as well as China, Russia, Turkey, and Iran, to mention a few, have increasingly resisted US preeminence.

This paper draws attention to some of the consequences of the decline and possible demise of the liberal world order, while focusing predominantly on factors that have divided the Western world, most notably the virulent rise of nationalism, nativism, populism, authoritarianism, anti-institutionalism, anti-immigrant, and anti-globalization sentiments. We argue, that as the United States further embraces economic nationalism and protectionism under the

Trump administration, the support for multilateral institutions, rooted in the liberal order, is likely to significantly retreat. The dissolution of the liberal order will arguably smooth the path for political disorder across the globe, while dividing the Western world at a time when an economically resurgent China, in a strategic alliance with a more assertive Russia under Putin, is likely to pose new challenges to the West.

### **The Divided West**

The West has never been as divided as it is now, perhaps since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s. Several factors have contributed to growing divisions in the West. There can be no denying that economic globalization and capital flight have intensified income inequality while at the same time intensifying anxieties surrounding national identity and cultural authenticity as rising concerns with the flow of increasing waves of immigrants and refugees take center stage in major Western capitals in the early twenty-first century.

Among other factors, closely related to the rapidly spreading anti-globalization sentiments, are the rise of right-wing populism and economic nationalism, facilitated in part by new information technologies, and partially manifested in Donald Trump's "America First," trade wars with countries like China, and the Muslim ban policy that attempted to bar the citizens of some twelve mainly Muslim majority countries from entering the United States. The expanding ideological rift with the European Union countries manifested in the US exit from the Paris Climate Agreement of 2015 and the Iran nuclear agreement in the same year all are emblematic of the widening rift in the NATO alliance.

This widening division between the European Union countries and the United States under the Trump administration, heralding the escalation of the Trans-Atlantic crisis that has been the bedrock of the post-World War II. The passing of the Western-dominated global order foretells the emergence of a new configuration of power and the manifestation of a new political reality. One of the consequences of this development is that the Western world is suffering from a crisis of leadership. Several notable recent political

developments, such as the quarrelsome negotiations over Brexit, new waves of anti-gas tax riots in France, and the calls for president Trump's removal from office, and the rise of right-wing politicians throughout Europe, challenging the political center, all are harbingers of this crisis' milieu. No less significant has been the Trump administration's policy of calling into question the importance of the multilateral institutions of global governance, such as: the United Nations, the European Union, NATO, and WTO.

Brexit remains an unsettled question and is likely to weaken the global position of the UK, the EU, and the US. Critics have repeatedly reminded us that the British withdrawal from the EU is not an economically prudent move. The EU is a massive, integrated market in which no tariffs are levied on imports and exports between member states.<sup>(4)</sup> Great Britain's exports to EU member states are far from negligible. Perhaps more damaging will be the UK's status as one of the world's biggest financial centers, adversely impacting US banks as part of a close financial nexus.

Many experts have raised long-term concerns about Great Britain's status as a center of global banking, as London has long been a global financial hub. If the UK remains in the EU, the financial services industry can conduct business anywhere on the continent and reposition their labor without worrying about visas.<sup>(5)</sup> While EU membership involves a partial loss of sovereignty, it allows the UK to maintain its seat at the negotiating table with other great powers of Europe.<sup>(6)</sup>

The rise of right-wing politicians in Hungary and Romania as indicated by their new populist and anti-immigrant policies has sharply divided the EU countries on issues of governance. These anti-democratic trends, which have given rise to economic nationalism and growing anti-immigrant incitements, are also evident in the diminishing support for Angela Merkel and her party and the strengthening of rightwing political parties in Germany.

The French riots, known as the *gilets jaunes* or Yellow Vests movement, became symbols of resistance, as polls showed that 72 percent of French citizens approved of the demonstrations.<sup>(7)</sup> The Yellow Vests movement were also welcomed outside France by other people facing the same problems such

as low-growth, austerity, declining wages, and widening inequality. The largest demonstrations transpired in Belgium are emblematic of widespread dissatisfaction. Similar gilets jaunes-inspired movements have occurred in Tunisia, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, Hungary, Germany, and Russia.<sup>(8)</sup>

French President Emmanuel Macron realized that—if left poorly managed and their underlying causes overlooked—these protests were likely to endanger the viability of his government that was rapidly overshadowed by growing internal divisions. This proved to be a significant development given that Macron aspired to emerge as the leader of Europe, filling the void created by Brexit and the declining power of Merkel’s government in Germany.

Predicated on liberal values of respect for democratic principles, human rights, and the rule of law upheld since the post-war period, the old liberal order appears in danger of fizzling out as never before. Critics of the so-called “America’s First” policy, however, argue that the Trump administration’s decision to abandon the role that the United States has played since the end of World War II is profoundly disturbing. The dissolution of a liberal world order so dedicated to the Universal principles set down by 1948 Declaration of Human Rights is certain to leave the world less stable and more chaotic. “The liberal world order,” as Richard Haass has observed, “cannot survive on its own, because others lack either the interest or the means to sustain it. The result will be a world that is less free, less prosperous, and less peaceful, for Americans and others alike.”<sup>(9)</sup>

### **Reacting to the Demise of the Liberal Order**

Fearful of the negative consequences of the dissolution of the liberal world order, a new strategic debate has engulfed not only the European continent but also other great powers across the globe. The idea of an EU collective defense, now dubbed as “an integrated EU military” is not new—as it has in the past been briefly mentioned by Silvio Berlusconi when he was the Italian prime minister, but more recently, by Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. Today, however, the idea of European Army has been resurrected in response to the Trump administration’s decision to double down on its criticism of the

EU members that have supposedly failed to adequately fulfill their burden-sharing obligations insofar as their financial contributions to NATO are concerned. Trump's decision to withdraw from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty has also provoked concern about future reliability of a US alliance with both France and Germany.

Considering the old Franco-German dispute over enlargement of the EU<sup>(10)</sup> and the upcoming European elections, it should come as no surprise the common expression of concern with US leadership and the requisite search for alternatives, considered "naïve" by some and "prudent" by others, has defied a strong and persistent consensus among the EU members. The lack of consensus springs from differing threat perceptions (terrorism, the refugee crisis, failed states, border security, a resurgent Russia, and the like.) among the EU member states. Yet, the timing of revisiting this idea has to do with the fact that the EU political elite feel that regrettably Europe can no longer count on the United States to fulfill its mutual defense obligations.

The EU member states have often found themselves on the opposite side of the United States, China, and Russia on several issues. Most notably, the EU countries' decision to support the Iran nuclear deal pitted them against the US position to withdraw from it. French President Emmanuel Macron has recently noted that Europe needed "a real European Army" to protect itself from China, Russia, and the United States amid growing dangers from cyber-hacking, meddling in various countries' electoral processes, and the US decision to withdraw from the aforementioned missile treaty. German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, further bolstered this idea by supporting President Macron's call for the European Army, telling the EU Parliament that such an army would not weaken the US-led NATO alliance, but could complement it in many ways.

This idea has prompted a series of reactions throughout Europe and North America. UK Air Marshal Sir Stuart Peach, chairman of the NATO Military Committee, dubbed this idea "unwise" while pointing to NATO's strength as a unique command and control network: "It's not rhetoric based. It's real planning based on real data," Peach noted. "And therefore, why would you wish to duplicate or replicate the strengths of an existing strong alliance?"<sup>(11)</sup>

Similarly, the US President Donald Trump, in a series of posted tweets, reacted negatively to Macron's comments, describing it as "very insulting." A similar criticism came from NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who asserted that "It will be not a wise decision by all those nations who are members of both NATO and the European Union to start to have two sets of command structures, or duplicate what NATO is doing." Similarly, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte has questioned the idea of an integrated European Army, stating that the "continent's safety could be guaranteed only through NATO."<sup>(12)</sup>

Russian President Vladimir Putin, by contrast, has reacted affirmatively to this proposal, describing it as a "positive" development. So have, in a rather startling manner, conservative and Euro-skeptic ruling elites of the Europe—including Czech President Milos Zeman and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban—whose support for the European army has been predicated on entirely different considerations. This support, by itself, should cause those in favor to pump the breaks on any potential future arming of the subcontinent. The goals of a secure Europe, one might argue, are not necessarily those of Orban or Zeman. That said, it is extremely important to consider these proposals with a considerable degree of skepticism, especially when avowed and militant nationalists support military solutions.

Whether this idea is a turning point in European politics remains open to debate. It is worth noting that EU member states are driven by different motives and incentives, making it extremely difficult to build a broader consensus in the face of the unanimity rule within the EU common defense policy. The most practical obstacle to the idea of an integrated European Army is the lingering issue of national sovereignty. Given the lack of political cohesion within the European Union, both the vision and the logistics of an authentic European integrated army are likely to fail to present a realistic alternative to NATO and may invite a proliferation or an arms race throughout Europe. Learning the lessons that presaged the last two World Wars, one should view with apprehension this move toward military expansion.<sup>(13)</sup>

### **The Return of the Neoconservatives**

President Trump's reassertion of antipathy to 'globalism' has brought back a new configuration of right-wing foreign policy to the fore, restoring the place of neoconservatives in such decision-making process. Neoconservatives, who in the past would position themselves against totalitarian powers such as Soviet Union and Communist China, and figured prominently in the George W. Bush administration, and served as the ideologues for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, have now moved toward anti-global institutions and right wing ideologies, causes, and interests under the presidency of Donald Trump.

By recasting the United States as a global victim, Stephen Wertheim notes, Trump has brought Michael Pompeo and John Bolton and their likes into his administration to push back against multilateral institutions and/or arrangements such as the Paris Climate Agreement, UNESCO, and the UN Human Rights Council, while exiting the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia. These moves are consistent with the neoconservatives' new rationale of criticizing existing institutions and treaties they consider to be unduly binding and inhibiting of a more active US foreign policy position. Trump's support for the right-wing government of Israel—i.e moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and cutting aid to the UN Agency for Palestinian Refugees—point to moves that are consonant with the neoconservatives' motives and trajectory.<sup>(14)</sup>

The Trump administration's trade wars with China, guided by his "America First policy," are likely to bolster protectionists, extremist groups, and ultra-nationalistic sentiments inside the United States and across the world, with far-reaching implications for international cooperation, diplomacy, and trade. The resultant trade and tariffs wars are bound to jeopardize trade ties not only with the EU countries but also with non-European countries as well. Such trends cannot be underestimated given that a predatory and zealous economic competition of the sort advocated by President Trump is likely to carry unforeseen political consequences—some costly, some may be manageable. What has been done, however, cannot be easily undone. All policies have both intended and unintended consequences that cannot be tamed. Thus, the long-

term impacts of Trump's policies remain to be seen. It is almost inextricable in discussing the impact of protectionism on the process and possibilities for global peace and economic advancement going forward. Since the end of the post-war order the keystone of this policy has been twofold: economic and human rights based—via institutions. When a pillar of this structure is actively assailed, one dreads the possible consequences for future economic and military conflicts.

### **Explaining the Rise of Populism**

The nativist and anti-establishment rebellion sweeping much of the West is a reaction to a suspicion of and hostility toward elites, mainstream politics, and established institutions that have failed to deliver on the promise of equity, opportunity and liberty.<sup>(15)</sup> In the United States, economic nationalism has coincided with a pushback against increased immigration, cultural fears, and nationalist sentiments and anxieties surrounding the US global decline and the pronounced resurgence of a nationalistic, suspicious, combative identity structure. More specifically, throughout the world, the rise of populism has been a backlash against declining incomes and rising job losses, largely as a result of new technologies, but partly due to the increasing imports of goods and commodities that undermine domestic sectors' ability to compete effectively against overseas economic forces.

Although, one cannot dismiss the movement of international capital into tax havens throughout the world as documented in the Panama and Paradise Papers, which illuminates the net-result of declining tax coffers and the need for convulsive austerity measures. Furthermore, it is not just that people feel frustrated by seeing that they are losing jobs and income, it is also the active cutback of social services and the diminishing returns of governance through financial suffocation.<sup>(16)</sup>

In France, for example, immigration is also linked to broader anxieties that foster support for the National Front Party in many rural areas and small towns, including the fear of terrorism and of economic collapse. These apprehensions have pushed workers in France's rust belt to embrace right-wing populism of

the National Front, raising the pressing question of whether France would remain in the EU.<sup>(17)</sup> Many European leaders face growing populist backlashes at home, making them less willing to address the Eurozone and refugee crises urgently. As a result, Germany is left carrying the greater share of burden when dealing with refugees.<sup>(18)</sup>

Throughout the West, immigration has thus become an increasingly explosive issue that has united populists against their elite antagonists. That may explain why Trump successfully campaigned on a populist platform that appealed directly to Americans' cultural fears and nationalist sentiments, while at the same time actively aiding the elite through regulatory slashes and tax cuts.<sup>(19)</sup> His election to the nation's highest office has spurred an opposition movement that fears that the country is abandoning cherished traditions of multiculturalism, tolerance, and free speech. In response, a resistance movement has emerged that intends to address a range of concerns including climate change, net neutrality, the Black Lives Matter movement, reproductive and immigrant and disability rights.<sup>(20)</sup>

Trump's abrupt executive order barring Muslims and refugees' entry into the United States, the so-called "the Muslim ban," based on a reckless campaign message, which became effective without vetting by the Department of Justice, the State Department, and Homeland Security Department, is likely to exacerbate the refugee crisis. Immigration from the seven Muslim-majority countries—Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen—targeted by this executive order has sparked protest throughout the United States and drawn global condemnation. What is more, the indirect reference to a religious test for refugees from Muslim nations bluntly appears in Trump's executive order, which insists on an extreme vetting plan to keep out "radical Islamic terrorists." It follows that "Christians and others from minority religions be granted priority over Muslims."<sup>(21)</sup>

Raymond Offensheiser, the president of Oxfam America, reacted to the executive order, noting that this move would harm families around the world who are terrorized by authoritarian governments. "The refugees impacted by [this] decision," Offensheiser continued, "are among the world's most

vulnerable people—women, children, and men—who are simply trying to find a safe place to live after fleeing unfathomable violence and loss.”<sup>(22)</sup> It is worth noting that immigrants and visitors from those countries are about 2 percent of all foreign-born people living in the United States.<sup>(23)</sup> Most United States residents from these seven countries have become citizens, while a small number, about 10,000, have served in the American military.<sup>(24)</sup> Throughout the Middle East, people have reacted negatively to this ban, as many have seen it as a collective punishment and a sign of discrimination.<sup>(25)</sup>

### **The Rise of the East**

There is a tectonic shift underway in the global balance of power in which the gravity of power dynamics are moving from the West to Asia. While the mercurial economic rise of China is a significant element in this transition in global power, according to political scientists, Parag Khanna, Asia is much bigger than China. It is a continent in which half of humanity resides. More specifically,

It is a multi-civilizational order spanning Saudi Arabia to Japan and Russia to Australia, linking 5 billion people and two-thirds of the world’s megacities, six of the 10 largest banks, eight of the 10 largest armies, five nuclear powers, and massive technological innovation through trade, finance and infrastructure networks that together represent 40 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>(26)</sup>

In the 19th century, the world was Europeanized. In the 20th century it was Americanized. Now in the 21st Century, the world is being irreversibly Asianized. Khanna asserts, that the countries of the Middle East must consider moving away from the post-colonial borders and define themselves as a part of West Asia. He also believes that the countries adjacent to the Persian Gulf are going to play an important role in global primacy of Asia as their energy and trade partners are primarily Asian countries. Therefore, they must carve a place for themselves in China’s ambitious Belt and Road initiative that is going to

transform the global economy fundamentally, further shifting its center of gravity toward Asia.<sup>(27)</sup>

China is poised to win the race to dominate artificial intelligence, thus enhancing its capacity to produce the technologies of the future and enhancing the provision of public and civil services for its population—a population that is keen to move forward. One commentator has in fact referred to the age of Artificial Intelligence, as an era in which “data [is] being the new oil and China [is] being Saudi Arabia.”<sup>(28)</sup> In December of 2018, China was responsible for landing a remotely piloted craft on the far side of the moon and the announcement of its plan to station an unmanned submarine referred to as the ‘Artificial Intelligence Atlantis’ project at the bottom of South China Sea that would be the first artificial intelligence colony in the world, are additional signs of its ambitions to be a leader in technologies of the future.<sup>(29)</sup>

China’s ambitious long-term strategy of “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR), also known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), first proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013, backed up by an estimated \$5 trillion, involves investment and the building of infrastructure that spans more than 65 countries across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, is illustrative of its long-term project of spreading its influence and power across the world. This colossal project speaks volumes about the way in which China’s economic prowess has been steadily gaining momentum and strength.<sup>(30)</sup>

China faces challenges from within and without to its ambitious project. The challenges from without entail the fragility or the lack of political stability, the rule of law, and mutually-agreed upon institutions, financial mechanisms, and issues relating to governance that would oversee the implementation of BRI to the satisfaction of all parties involved. In other words, because this is an initiative that starts from Beijing and it is unidirectional in the flow of capital, goods, and commodities, it is important for China’s partners to buy into the project and see “China’s dream” as their own and embrace the idea that they stand to benefit substantially from China’s investment in their infrastructure and economies. The second challenge to China’s BRI is from within: Would Chinese population support massive investment in distant lands

that could potentially be risky as opposed to investment at home that may have immediate and tangible benefits for their welfare?

Russia is increasingly reacting favorably to convergence of its own Eurasian economic initiative with China's BRI, as the two countries' strategic partnership deepens in the face of more confrontational policies of the Trump administration. Hence, Russia's resurgence and its increasing power projection in Syria, and closer relations with Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia, all US allies, cannot be overlooked. Nor should its expanding commercial ties with the Middle East, exemplified by its increasing cooperation with natural gas exporters such as Algeria, Iran, and Qatar, cannot be ignored. Yet, the fact remains that Russia's intervention in Syria in support of the Assad regime need not be seen as contradictory to US goals in the region insofar as Washington views Assad as a lesser evil as compared to radical jihadists, such as al-Qaeda and the Daesh (the Islamic State known as ISIS), who might replace him if his regime were to collapse.<sup>(31)</sup>

In the case of Syria, it should also be noted that Russia has found a useful ally in Iran for supporting Syria's Assad regime. For Iran, cooperation with Russia during the Syrian civil war has almost certainly been based on their pragmatic goals and geostrategic reasons. Both countries have cooperated to prevent yet another regime change in their respective spheres of influence. While Russia's presence in Syria is motivated by her interest in containing the US presence in the north east Mediterranean, Iran seeks to consolidate its access to Lebanon and Syria as part of an effort to undermine the influence of its Arab rivals and Israel. The question then arises: Whether this short-term cooperation—marked by strategic interdependence between Moscow and Tehran—would last in a post-conflict Syria and the shifting alliances of the Middle East politics.

Of the several factors that could potentially complicate Russia's relations with Iran, the two most significant ones are (1) whereas Iran seems intent on keeping the Assad regime in place at any cost, Russia appears willing to consider the possibility of a post-Assad Syria<sup>(32)</sup> and (2) Russia's evolving and improving ties with Iran's key regional rivals—Saudi Arabia and Israel—poses

a serious challenge to its long-term relations with Iran. In addition, as Egypt and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries with the approval of Israel are attempting to bring the Assad regime to the Arab fold in an attempt to prevent a closer alliance between Tehran and Damascus in post -Syrian civil war era, Tehran may find that Pan-Arabism at times can trump Shi'ite solidarity.

In light of the complexities of these new evolving political realities on the ground, Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria is tempered by the fact that these states' have divergent and overlapping interests as well as an ongoing rivalry in energy and political realms in the coming years that may lead the current alliances to be circumvented as the regional and global realities that engulf this relationship evolve.

### **What is Next?**

What explains the Trump Administration's support for economic nationalism as well as growing divisions in the Western world with regard to resurgent anti-globalization trends manifested in his 'America First' policies? These questions demand a systematic investigation in a time of deep global crisis. As noted above, the West is divided and entangled in a variety of disjunctures from within, at a time when the US foreign policy under the Trump administration has deepened fractures among the EU member states and the EU and the United States. As China and Russia are expanding and solidifying their influence, power, and geopolitical status throughout the world, it is patently clear that there is a direct link between the negative consequences of Trump policies, the rise of right-wing populism in the West, and the ascendance of the East.

Despite their rivalries and conflicts, both China and Russia are looking for ways to improve their bilateral relations with the United States in order to curtail and better manage regional and global tensions. Perhaps more crucially, the risks of abandoning a liberal world order, which for more than seven decades has espoused relative prosperity, and a legal and institutional framework for conflict resolution, may prove to be colossally damaging and destabilizing.

The US allies, some observers have suggested, in North America (Canada), Europe (France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, and the rest of the EU), and Asia (Australia, Japan, and South Korea) must take the lead in international institutions, such as the UN and the World Bank, preventing the possible corrosive erosion of these institutions while also ensuring their multilateral viability and political legitimacy. These countries must raise their voice and deploy their leverage in unison to promote democracy and human rights where ever and whenever such values are challenged.<sup>(33)</sup>

While the complexities and challenges facing the liberal global order are real, it also matters how to reassess the terms of trade, regional regimes, and multilateral institutions for advancing both human and national security in an effort to bolster strategic interests of all affected parties and/or actors concerned. That these complexities and challenges require painstakingly difficult policy shifts and adjustments should not serve as an excuse to resurrect virulent nationalism and national chauvinism, fear of immigrants, and the return to isolationism. In fact, they should be viewed as an extra incentive to invent new ways to maintain peace and prosperity for all, however difficult and complex achieving such lofty goals may be.

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