

What to Do About Saudi Arabia
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Sometimes, one only misses something when it is gone. This is the case with America's long-standing foreign policy, our policy of responsibility for global prosperity.

At the end of World War II, we were the only nation not devastated by that war. Shortly before our victory, the US convened a global conference of our allies and made an offer that couldn't be refused. We wanted all of our allies to emancipate their colonies, just as we did with our one colony, the Philippines. Colonialism would no longer be acceptable. We then established a new global economy that barred tariffs and other impediments to trade, but guaranteed with our naval power absolute freedom of the seas so that trade could flourish.

The UN was created, in the hope that international disputes could be resolved by common action, not warfare. We established, under the UN (but actually guaranteed by us) a global international fund to help countries devastated by war recover, as well as helping perennial impoverished countries to develop.

Our global system was largely successful, lifting more people out of poverty than had ever happened before, as well as convincing most countries that participatory governance, democracy, was better than anything a dictator could offer.

The peaceful world order, however, had a fierce opponent: the USSR, which rejected the idea that colonialism was obsolete (they kept and expanded theirs), joined shortly thereafter by China, which made the same imperialistic choice. In addition, a number of countries that joined the UN, pretending to observe its values, had no such intention. The Muslim-majority countries rejected the notion that women should be accorded equality under the law, or that religious tolerance was right.

Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia's brief entrance to the global system, they reverted to authoritarianism and have attempted to retake their lost colonies. The battles in the Ukraine and the occupation of the Crimea are but the latest examples. The supposedly freed colonies, such as those in Central Asia, all have Soviet-style dictatorships approved by Russia.

Critics of the American-made global rule of law system resent the cost (a perennial problem in Congress) and those, like our current president and his cadre of populists, who urge "America First" and "Who needs allies?" We are witnessing under this president the withdrawal of the US from our remarkable global system: scorn for the EU, the first time Europeans have not been at war with each other in centuries; scorn for NATO, a union of democratic nations allied to resist Russian aggression; and a return of the idea that tariffs be used to intimidate allies into "deals" only good for us.

I do have a few complaints about the American global system, issues that have begun to emerge in recent years. We have no way of consistently supporting our best values, values that promote rule of law and decency around the world. We have been a beacon of freedom for decades, and our friends (and even our enemies) expect us to support such values. But we often had reasons to violate our standards when certain countries were needed during the Cold War, or were needed because of their natural resources (oil), or countries such as China, which at least accepted capitalism (to their benefit) while rejecting political freedom.

Saudi Arabia has long been our ally, although their culture is distasteful. We were heartened to think that the new Crown Prince was a reformer who might actually open up this fundamentalist Muslim prison. What to do, then, when the prince orders the assassination of a journalist who was loyal opposition, not even a dissident? He had him murdered in Turkey, a US NATO ally.

An American president would be expected to condemn and punish such an action. President Trump, however, is reluctant to let moral indignation (and support of the free press) interfere with potential lucrative arms sales. Does money trump morality? And does a journalist matter to this president, who openly cheers physical violence against the press?

We need to revisit what our values are as a country, and revise our foreign policy accordingly.

685 words

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