



# WHY AMERICA MUST LEAD

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The world is on fire. The Middle East is being torn up by war and terrorism that have forced millions of people to flee. Syria looks like the disaster of a generation. Iran seeks to dominate the region and openly declares its intention to wipe a sovereign nation off the map. While in Eastern Europe, a resurgent Russia has seized Ukrainian territory by force of arms. China is flexing its muscles against its neighbors around the South China Sea. There is only one nation in the world capable of putting out these fires.

That nation is, of course, the United States.

Many Americans will argue, understandably, that this is not fair. It may not be fair. But it is a fact. Only America has the diplomatic reach, the financial resources, and the firepower to lead the free world against the autocrats, rogue states and terrorists that are trying to overwhelm it.

As the Prime Minister of Denmark from 2001 to 2009, and the secretary-general of NATO from 2009 to 2014, I know how important American leadership is. I've seen firsthand what happens when America tries to lead from behind instead of leading from the front.

A case in point: Russia illegally annexed Crimea in March 2014—the first gunpoint land grab in Europe since the end of World War II.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry called it an “unbelievable act of aggression.” He went on, “You just don’t, in the twenty-first century, behave in nineteenth-century fashion by invading another country on a completely trumped-up pretext.”

This might be an admirable statement of principle, but as a guide to policy, it is dangerously naive, because whether it was believable or not, it happened.

The first half of the twentieth century was the bloodiest in human history. That was before America became a global superpower. Since America’s ascendancy, the major world powers have coexisted in relative peace. Now that peace is threatened, and America must step forward again. Simply put, no one else can do it.

Europe is too weak and divided to lead the world. The free nations have an essential role to play, and they must shoulder their full share of the cost, but only America has the credibility to lead.

This is not just about money or manpower. It is also about morality. Only America has the

moral greatness to lead the free world—not for the sake of power, but for the sake of peace. Yet the U.S. will only be able to ensure peace if its leaders act with conviction. If the world even thinks that America lacks the will to use force or enforce its red lines, it leaves a vacuum that will be filled by corrupt autocrats, rogue states and murderous terrorists.

As tempting as retreat might be, it won't make America and the other freedom-loving countries safer or more prosperous. History shows us: the bad guys don't stay in their own neighborhoods.

We only need to look at Pearl Harbor or 9/11 to be reminded that the safety of Americans is deeply connected to the rest of the world. And the stability that has permitted the vast and world-wide economic expansion since World War II, an expansion that has lifted billions of people out of poverty, could not have happened if America had not guaranteed it.

But freedom, stability and prosperity don't come for free. And they are not the norm—they are the exception.

An American retreat will unleash a new plague of dictators and oppressors who seek to undo all the good America has done to secure peace and prosperity around the world for decades.

And that could lead to a fire no one will be able to put out.

I'm Anders Fogh Rasmussen for Prager University.