

# America's Absence in Istanbul: A Sign of Decline, Not Surrender

Team Trump missed the summit on Syria. In that, Patrick Lawrence sees another sign of Washington's failure to accept its loss of diplomatic primacy.

## Lost in the Memory

## Palace:

## US Leads, But No One

## Follows

By Patrick Lawrence

*Special to Consortium News*



You would hardly know it from reading the U.S. press, but a summit of considerable significance took place late last month. German, French, Russian, and Turkish leaders convened in Istanbul Oct. 27 to create a comprehensive plan to end the seven-year war in Syria. On the agenda: increase humanitarian aid, rebuild ruined towns and cities, assist returning refugees, draft a new constitution and arrange internationally supervised elections. All this will take time, but the Syria story is evolving from one of conflict to one of reconciliation and reconstruction.

Two features of the summit deserve special note.

The four nations are not all fast friends, to put it mildly. But they drew together to find common interests in resolving what may count as the worst crisis since the Cold War's end. Second, there was a conspicuous absence at the Istanbul gathering: the United States. Despite its prominent role in the Syrian conflict for at least the past six years, if not longer, the United States wanted no part of a many-sided summit dedicated to resolving it via negotiation.

A matter of days later came the Trump administration's sweeping new sanctions against Iran, planned for many months and put into force at midnight on Nov. 4.

Never mind Washington's adversaries: Even its traditional allies in Europe are resisting the United States. This new round of sanctions rank among the stupidest foreign policy moves of Trump's two years in office. Two others were withdrawing from the climate pact in June 2017 and unilaterally recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital six months later.

### **Three Things Now Clear**

At this point, three things are clear about the Trump administration's approach to global affairs.

No. 1: Team Trump's foreign policies are easily the most incoherent of any administration in recent memory. The United States does or does not want to settle the Korean question. It does or does not have an even-handed plan for peace in the Mideast. It has or has not abandoned its campaign to depose the Assad government in Damascus. What

appears so on Monday appears otherwise by midweek.

No 2: Time and again, this administration overplays its hand. In case after case it acts on its own, expecting other nations to follow, only to discover that few or none do. Since Trump took office, misjudging U.S. prerogatives may be among the only consistent feature of his foreign policy.

No. 3: "America First" begins to shape up as "America Last" on the foreign policy side. We are a long way from "the indispensable nation," the phrase that Madeleine Albright used for the United States during her time as secretary of state in the Clinton administration. Two years into Trump's presidency, Albright's assertion—which was never more than U.S. hubris at its purest—looks like it might be headed to a museum.

This is not solely due to incompetence in the Trump White House, although this is considerable. The United States has been unable to find its place in a swiftly changing world order at least since the George W. Bush administration. It has consistently mishandled relations with China and Russia from one administration to the next, to take two prominent examples: trans-Atlantic ties with longtime allies (who too often behave like vassals) have deteriorated steadily for years due to Washington's misjudgments.

The Trump administration's confusion merely makes the gravity of our moment more difficult to deny: Absent last century's simplicities—chief among them the binary East-West division—the United States is losing its grip on leading.

**Talk of Withdrawal**

There is much talk in Washington these days of a U.S. withdrawal from global affairs. Ivo Daalder, a former ambassador to NATO and now president of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, recently co-authored a book, with James Lindsay, called "The Empty Throne: America's Abdication of Global Leadership." It is a long lament about what its title suggests: the United States is surrendering—supposedly—its position as No. 1 among nations.

This is a misreading, perfectly upside down from reality. The United States is not surrendering anything. That is precisely the problem. It refuses to give up its long-asserted right to act unilaterally on the assumption other nations will either fall in line or silently acquiesce.

At the same time, Washington declines to participate in multilateral efforts to resolve wars, competing political or territorial claims, and other such problems via diplomatic negotiation, often with adversaries. This helps explain why the Trump administration repudiated the Paris climate pact and then the accord governing Iran's nuclear programs: Both implicitly demonstrate that multipolarity is an inevitable 21<sup>st</sup> Century reality.

Daalder acknowledged this during a [recent talk](#) at the Council on Foreign Relations, even if he seemed not to have grasped his own lesson. "As the U.S. withdraws," he said, "it's not involved in building coalitions bringing people together to deal with global challenges, people are going to turn to others."

The Istanbul summit on Syria is an excellent case in point. The United States should have been there. South Korea is

another. While President Moon Jae-in has to manage Seoul's traditional ties to Washington delicately, he has unmistakably seized the lead in Northeast Asia and repeatedly signals that he remains committed to a settlement with the North—ultimately with or without U.S. cooperation.

Nostalgia is part of the problem. The world turns, and Washington is lost in a kind of memory palace, where it nurses the desire to prolong those decades of unchallenged primacy that it enjoyed after World War II. It refuses to accept there is no turning back the clock. While it wants to play “follow the leader” other nations drop out of the game.

Vigorous, nearly universal opposition to the new sanctions against Iran, Seoul's determination to press on toward peace on the Korean Peninsula, the summit on Syria in Istanbul: They all make the same point. Washington must abandon its Wilsonian ambition to shape the world in its own image if it is to remain an effective power—as it can and should—in the new global order. The new Iran sanctions already appear to be a turning point in this respect: Donald Trump's Washington thought it could lead, but virtually no one is following.

There is no “abdication” and no new isolationist era in the offing. But until the U.S. accepts the new norms of statecraft in a world of rising powers, we will watch as other nations withdraw from America—a very different thing.

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