

ASHLEY: The U.S. is the world's largest trading nation and spends more on defense than the next nine countries combined. America's peace and prosperity depend on what happens overseas. But despite its importance, foreign policy is mentioned less than other issues in the presidential campaign. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. In this Election Briefing episode, we look at America's role in the world with two highly experienced journalists, Peter Ford and Howard LaFranchi. Based in Paris, Peter is Global Affairs Correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor. Previously, he spent a decade as the paper's Beijing Bureau Chief. Howard has been The Monitor's Diplomacy Correspondent, based in Washington, since 2001.

ASHLEY: We look at the implications of President Trump's America First policy and the U.S. retreat from global institutions. We reached Peter at his home in France, and the audio quality was a bit wobbly. First question to Peter Ford. How has America's role changed in the past three and a half years?

PETER: Well, I think it's changed in a very deliberate way, as President Trump wanted it to. And rather than being the go-to country, what Madeleine Albright used to call "the indispensable nation," America has just become another superpower, and one interested, frankly, only in protecting the interests of its citizens and its national interests. That has really pulled the rug out, frankly, from a lot of countries, especially America's traditional allies who are still finding their way around this new world and still trying to figure out what they can do without America and how they might go about doing it without angering America too much.

RICHARD: One example of that, Peter, is President Trump's refusal to work with the World Health Organization during the coronavirus pandemic. Has that weakened the global response?

PETER: Well, I think it has, quite apart from the financing, which is what President Trump threatened to pull. But it's more than just a question of money. It's a question of leadership and commitment and the sense that there is a serious, organized, and capable country playing a lead role in gathering the support and action that's required. It's hard to imagine an international affair, an international matter that is more in need of international cooperation. And this American administration doesn't put a very high price on cooperation.

ASHLEY: The Trump administration has withdrawn from some major international agreements, including the Paris Climate Accord, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Iran nuclear deal. It's pretty sweeping, isn't it?

PETER: It is, and I think Mr. Trump made it clear at the beginning that that's what he intended to do, and not everybody believed him because it was so dramatic an

outlook. But he has followed through, and I think that whoever wins the election, I think that is a pattern that has been set. I think that momentum has been lost in terms of American leadership of the world. But even if Joe Biden won the election, and even if he wanted to reverse course, it won't just be a question of switching things back on again overnight.

RICHARD: The headlines are often dominated by President Trump's personality and, most recently, his illness with coronavirus. But we're looking here, in this episode, at policy. Howard, has America's retreat from global involvements weakened the architecture of major institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization?

HOWARD: Yes. I don't think there's any doubt that the U.S. retreat has weakened the global architecture. I mean, any architecture has an architect, and the U.S. was the architect and for a very specific reason. It was thought, and all these institutions were developed because it was seen as, actually, kind of a bargain for the United States. The more the world prospered, the United States would benefit. So, yes, I would say dismantling that has affected everyone. Of course, I think, Ashley, you mentioned the Paris Climate Accord, but of course many consider that, climate change, the world's greatest threat and will be once the coronavirus is addressed and taken care of. But, again, as Peter was saying, there's no global cooperation on what is a globally existential threat.

ASHLEY: Joe Biden and Donald Trump have very different views of America's role in the world. What are they, Howard?

HOWARD: Well, I agree with Peter that if Joe Biden wins this election, it's not going to be a matter of flipping a switch and returning to a world of American leadership of 2016. For one thing, this process of the U.S. retreat, really, there are aspects of it that began under President Obama. But I think that Joe Biden, he has said that he will return to the Paris Climate Accords. I don't think that there will be an effort to automatically return to the Iran nuclear deal, but perhaps some new negotiations. But I think there will be some return or effort to return to the concept of America leading its alliances and strength together rather than standing alone.

ASHLEY: One example where the U.S. has been involved diplomatically is in the Middle East. Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates have recognized Israel after decades of hostility. But elsewhere, there's been a pulling back of American involvement in regional conflicts. How does that change the global outlook, Peter?

PETER: As they say, while the cat's away, the mice will play. And leaders around the world, allies of the United States have started to do things and realize they can get away with things, that the United States is not going to do anything about it. So we have, for example, India. We've had President Modi annulling Kashmir's autonomy, and

there was not a squeak out of Washington about this. President Erdogan sent troops to invade northeastern Syria, fight Kurds, who are actually part of the Western alliance.

Mr. Trump didn't only not say anything. He actually enabled it by pulling American troops out three or four days before Erdogan moved. So quite a lot of leaders around the world who are getting used to getting away with things because the Americans are absent. I think once that mood takes hold of these leaders, they are reluctant to let it go. And I think any American president is going to have to cope with that.

RICHARD: You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley. We're speaking with Peter Ford and Howard LaFranchi of The Christian Science Monitor.

RICHARD: Before hearing more, first a word of something new from Common Ground Committee.

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RICHARD: Howard, I take it that whoever is elected, the likelihood that the U.S. would send large numbers of troops back to Iraq or Afghanistan, this is probably off the table, isn't it?

HOWARD: Yes, that's right, and that kind of intervention as we saw from President Bush after the 9/11 attacks, the invasion of Iraq, that's not going to happen again. But I would also say that I think the hostility and standing up to China, whoever takes office in January of next year, that has become a very bipartisan position.

RICHARD: That invites a question on the theme of our podcast, which is Let's Find Common Ground. Are there common ground aspects that are shared by both President Trump and Joe Biden, Peter?

PETER: Well, I think that there clearly are, and everybody's approach to China has changed radically over the last three or four years, certainly since I left Beijing five years ago. It's an entirely different relationship. I think there's common ground on a concern about China's actions and militarization of the South China Sea. There's common concern about China's theft of intellectual property. There's concern, although not [inaudible 00:10:38] action, but a common concern about how China has behaved and will behave in Hong Kong. There's a great number of issues on which Trump and Biden and Republicans and Democrats agree about China policy. The question is, frankly, how many of them will they act on?

HOWARD: I think, too, there will be some common ground on trade policy, agriculture trade policy, for example. There could be quite a bit of common ground between Republicans and Democrats. You might also see some effort to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership since that has gone ahead as 11 countries instead of 12, as it was originally designed if it included the United States. That could be something that could be relatively easy for the United States to do. That, too, would be a way... Remember that trade agreement was set up not just as a trade agreement but really as a way of strengthening the community of free economies and democracies in the Pacific Basin.

ASHLEY: Has America been weakened by America First? Are we now America alone?

HOWARD: I would say yes. Peter mentioned the WHO, for example, and how it weakens the world's response to such a crisis if there isn't some country leading the global effort to address that kind of crisis. And if you look back to Ebola, for example, which the United States was slow in responding to that, but once it did, it really marshaled contributions and effort from many countries, and that crisis was stopped in its tracks. Most people believe that it was well-addressed by the international community led by the United States. So, to not be playing that role in this crisis, I think that weakens the United States. And you can go down the line. If you look at the Iran nuclear deal, for example, the United States is alone standing outside of that agreement, and it's hard to argue that the United States is stronger because of that.

PETER: I think there's no doubt, as Howard was saying, that America is alone. It's alone, also, on the Paris Climate Agreement. It's the only country that [inaudible 00:13:29] it. But I think the most important aspect of this is the United States has lost a lot of respect.

ASHLEY: Peter, an example of this decline in respect is how this country has handled the coronavirus. A recent poll from Pew Research asked people overseas about this.

PETER: The general perception around the world is that the United States has failed dismally in dealing with the coronavirus. A median of just 15% in 13 countries that Pew looked at, a median of just 15% say the U.S. have done a good job dealing with the coronavirus. But Yascha Mounk, who teaches at Harvard, I think he said that COVID has made people take the U.S. less seriously, and if people look at you with pity, that's not a great qualification for heading up the free world. The coronavirus has dealt a serious blow to America's reputation in the world.

RICHARD: I'd like to talk about the future and what might happen in a Biden or Trump administration. First, with Donald Trump, what will change or be reinforced around the world as a result of a Trump reelection?

PETER: I don't think the direction of Donald Trump will be changed at all. I don't see anything that would make him change the direction unless we're looking at an all-out confrontation with the Chinese and him backing down, which is unlikely. What will change, I think the world will become more fragmented because the institutions that hold it together will be weakened more, and the [inaudible 00:15:17] will simply stop functioning, as WTO for example, which is effectively paralyzed at the moment because it has no elected body because the United States won't approve any new judges.

So low-level work goes on, but the important work of the WTO has had to stop. And you'll probably see that with other institutions. And of course, when there aren't institutions holding things together and holding people together and offering a forum in which they can talk, misunderstandings arise, mistakes get made, and people do things that they would regret later and could possibly be very dangerous.

RICHARD: Howard, how do you see it?

HOWARD: Basically, I don't see a second term for Donald Trump being that much different. But I do think it's important to point out, as well... I mean, we talk about a retreat, which is true. But the United States, for example, even under the Trump administration, has remained the largest humanitarian donor and as a donor to education programs for refugee children. Those populations are higher than they've ever been. The Trump administration is proud of mentioning that the United States has remained the largest humanitarian donor. The problem I see, though, is that there's probably little sign that a second Trump administration would really go after addressing the reasons there are more refugees than ever since World War II.

ASHLEY: And Howard, if Joe Biden wins, how would things change?

HOWARD: I think there would be a very quick signaling, anyway, that a more cooperative United States is back on the stage. I wouldn't be surprised to see, under a President Biden, something early, some sort of a tour to try to repair relations, especially with our closest allies.

PETER: I think making nice with aggrieved allies is a pretty cost-free enterprise. The trouble is that I don't think there's any likelihood of a tour of aggrieved allies in the immediate future because no American president's going to travel, very likely, for the next few months. So we can have virtual makeup sessions.

ASHLEY: A Zoom makeup session between Biden and a whole screen full of people.

PETER: Exactly, one of those multi-person Zoom conversations where everyone's a postcard.

ASHLEY: Peter, this one's for you because you've lived all over the world. How does it feel to you personally as you view America from Europe about what's going on in the United States in the past few years?

PETER: Disappointed, I think. When I was growing up, I was always strongly critical of the United States and Europe's foreign policy. But having, as you say, lived all over the world and most recently in China for 10 years, it became clear to me that I certainly do not want China ruling the world. And the only country that could stand for the sorts of things that I stood for was the United States with all its faults. And the last few years have suggested that maybe the United States won't stand for them, and I think that bodes ill for the world's future if it continues to be the case.

RICHARD: When you say the United States is no longer standing for the principles it once stood for, I assume you mean the principles of democracy, of freedom of the press, freedom of speech, of standing up for human rights, at least to a limited degree.

PETER: Yes, those are the fundamentals. I think there's room to doubt how committed the president is, how deeply they resonate with him in his heart and his mind. And it takes that kind of commitment to impose those sorts of values.

RICHARD: Are either of you hopeful about the near and long-term future of America's role in the world, or is it inevitable that American leadership will not be what it was even in the post-Cold-War world of the 1990s and early 2000s?

PETER: Well, I don't think they're mutually exclusive. I think we can be hopeful because it won't be back to the way it used to be. I think a solidly unipolar world such as we had before the Soviet Union was not necessarily a good thing, and we saw the results in Iraq and Afghanistan. I think it is inevitable that America will share power. As Howard said, America's withdrawal from the world stage or its reluctance to play the decisive role always on the world stage predates President Trump and reflects economic and geopolitical realities beyond America's control.

RICHARD: So what's been called the rise of the rest.

PETER: So there's no way that we're going back to the unipolar world of the 1990s and 2000s, but that's not necessarily a bad thing.

HOWARD: Yes, I think a much more multipolar world is what is in our future. I would say I'm hopeful that some sort of middle point can be found where there is still leadership from the United States on the values that really much of the world, whether we saw it in Hong Kong, or I see it when I report in India, but I think there is still a place and a vital role for American leadership on the values that the United States has built with its allies over the past seven or eight decades. I do think that there is hope for keeping those values alive and really taking them farther.

RICHARD: Thank you very much.

ASHLEY: Yes, thanks so much for joining us.

PETER: It's been fun.

ASHLEY: This podcast is part of our briefing series on the election.

RICHARD: Learn more about finding common ground and also the new scorecard ratings of your elected representatives at commongroundcommittee.org. Thanks for listening.