

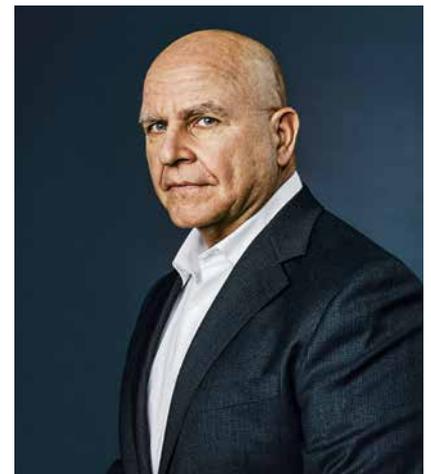
Competence and Confidence

The need for a sensible and sustained foreign policy

In 1989, I was a captain in the Second Armored Cavalry Regiment headquartered in Nurnberg. On November 9, 1989, our scouts watched as East German guards stepped aside and threw open the gates. The German people reunified. The Soviet Union broke apart. America, West Germany and our NATO allies had won the Cold War. There was reason for optimism, but the free world became overconfident. Today we face daunting challenges, in part, because overconfidence bred complacency.

Complacency stemmed from three assumptions about the post-Cold War era. First, some believed that an arc of history guaranteed the primacy of free and open societies over authoritarian and closed societies. The expansion of democracy was inevitable. Second, some assumed that old rules of international relations and competition had become irrelevant. A great-power condominium and global governance would displace rivalry. Third, some asserted that America's and NATO's military prowess would guarantee 'full-spectrum dominance' over any potential enemy. Military competition was over.

Today it is obvious that all three assumptions were false. Vladimir Putin's Kremlin is fostering a crisis of confidence in democratic governance, the European experiment, and the transatlantic alliance. The Chinese Communist Party is stifling the freedom of its own people and exporting its authoritarian, mercantilist model to reshape the international order



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in its favour. The Kim family regime in North Korea is developing the most destructive weapons on earth and it seems that Iran's theocracy is not far behind as it continues its destructive proxy wars across the Middle East. As Europe and America emerge from the pandemic and recession, they must work together to regain competitive advantages and overcome those and other challenges such as climate change and health security. If they fail to do so, the world will be less free, less prosperous and less safe.

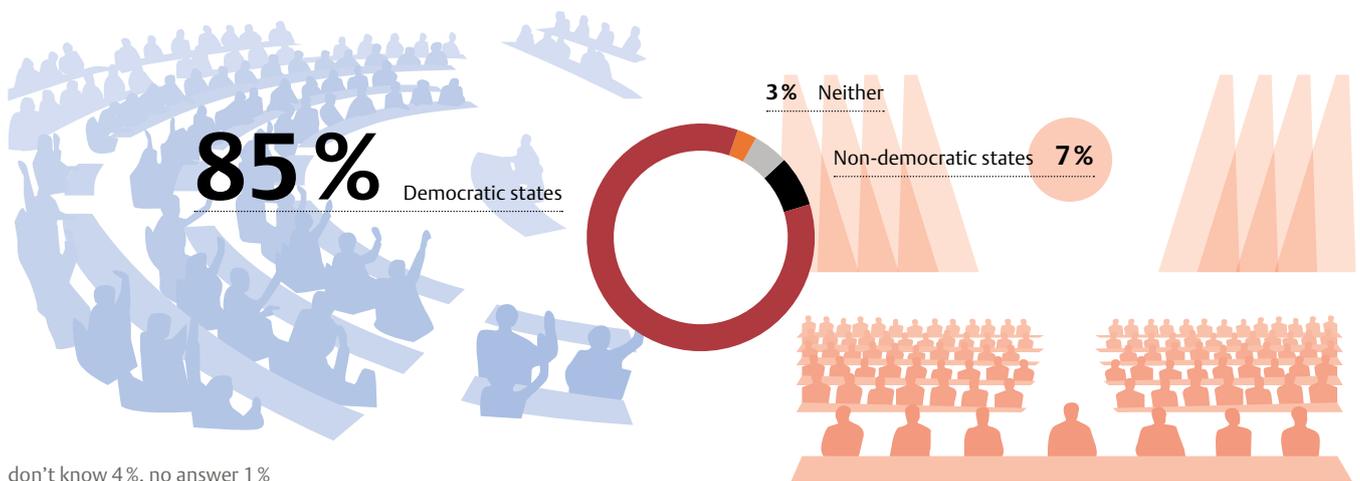
Overcoming crucial challenges will require a high degree of competence. The first step in building

competence is to overcome what we might call strategic narcissism: our tendency since the end of the Cold War to define problems as we would like them to be, and to indulge in the conceit that others have no aspirations or agency except in reaction to American and European policies and actions. In its most extreme form strategic narcissism appears in the belief that overly powerful and interventionist United States, sometimes aided by its allies in Europe, is the principal cause of the world's problems. But in reality, adversaries act based on their own aspirations and goals and US and European disengagement would not make those problems easier to overcome.

Although the Trump administration was right to demand that NATO allies, especially Germany, do more to share the burden of collective defence, reducing US forces in Europe appears unwise at a time when Putin's principal rival was poisoned with a military-grade nerve agent and the Kremlin threatens to quash calls for freedom in Belarus. The impulse to withdraw from challenges abroad is likely to grow as the United States emerges from a contentious presidential election and the triple crises associated with the pandemic, economic recession, and social unrest sparked by the murder of George Floyd.

Who is better suited to meet the international challenges of the 21st century, such as pandemics, climate change, digitalization and international tensions?

But there is an alternative: sensible and sustained engagement. The COVID-19 experience reinforces a fundamental lesson of 9/11: threats that originate abroad, if not checked, can move rapidly across our world. Seventy-five years after the most destructive war in modern history, we should remember that it is much cheaper to deter Russia and China than it would be to bear the costs of a catastrophic war. Sensible and sustained engagement might displace strategic narcissism with what the historian Zachary Shore terms 'strategic empathy', the recognition that others influence our collective future. But improved competence based on strategic empathy is not enough to build a better world. The United States and Europe must rebuild confidence as well. As the late philosopher Richard Rorty observed, 'National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement.' If we lack self-respect, we will lack the confidence necessary to strengthen our partnerships and implement a competitive, sensible and sustained foreign policy. To generate pride in the free world, Americans and Europeans, when debating issues that divide us, might first devote at least equal time to what unites us – especially the principles that bind us together such as our commitment to freedom and human rights. And while prioritizing self-criticism and the acknowledgement of imperfections in our democracies, we might also celebrate the fact that our citizens have a say in how they are governed and can demand more competent policies and stronger cooperation to overcome the difficult challenges we face.



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