My wife, Caro, and I returned to the South of France this summer as we have done every year since 1989. Our village has residents from a dozen European countries as well as a handful from Latin America and the Middle East. Over the past two years, we have been joined by several families from Russia and Ukraine.

Our global village takes a keen interest in the United States. We are one of only two American families, and our neighbors have asked us how their children and grandchildren can gain college admissions, get business internships and find work opportunities in the States. However, over the past few years there has been a noticeable shift in their attitude toward America. Our neighbors are showing less interest in their children coming to the United States and more concern for “what’s happening in America.” They hear a lot about homelessness, gun violence and social unrest, and no longer see us as “the shining city upon the hill.” Instead, they see a nation rife with political divisiveness, social disunity and racial discord.

In particular, they are baffled by American politics. They are deeply troubled by the growing likelihood of an election rematch between “an old and addled” Joe Biden and “a narcissistic and megalomaniacal” Donald Trump. “Quelle tragédie!” They are losing confidence in America’s ability to hold safe, fair and trustworthy elections. With radical extremes in both parties, coupled with bountiful guns and boundless conspiracy theories, they worry about the possibility of civil war.

My neighbors are fearful that America has lost its ability to provide leadership in a world that desperately needs us to combat the ascending power and influence of autocratic countries, in particular China. They are dismayed that most Americans show little interest in and less knowledge of what’s happening outside our North American borders. They point to polls that show relatively few Americans can name even a single leader of a European country, with the notable exceptions of Putin and Zelenskyy, though their first names (Vladimir and Volodymyr, respectively) would be a stretch for all but the cognoscenti. With almost the entirety of our news coverage focused exclusively on the United States, our ignorance of world affairs is not surprising.

The world has become ever more interconnected, as evidenced by the need for global responses to
climate change, pandemics and cybersecurity, but my neighbors see Americans becoming more insular and more provincial. With a horrific war raging in Eastern Europe for almost two years, they are astonished that many Americans still cannot locate Ukraine on a map, and few know anything about the threatened Baltic states, yet alone are able to name any of these countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). They are particularly worried about the United States’ continuing commitment to Ukraine, and they are alarmed by the leading Republican presidential candidates who openly question America’s unconditional support for the war against Russia. They fear that any diminished commitment would embolden Russia and further endanger Europe.

Though Americans’ provincialism is distressing to my European neighbors, they are comforted by American companies continuing to invest and grow in Europe. Although many are reshoring their R&D, manufacturing and production, particularly from China, the great majority remain committed to their European operations. For decades, many American corporations have taken a global perspective, enabling them to become world leaders in many fields, including IT, healthcare and consumer products. To maintain their competitive advantage, U.S. companies need to retain their global focus.

Boards must be aware of how the world views America and what opportunities and risks exist in international markets. Voices from different regions of the world need to be heard in the boardroom. Directors with international experience can provide this valuable background and perspective. Therefore, board nominating committees should seek out executives experienced with foreign operations and knowledgeable about global markets. As the past three years have demonstrated, boards can have periodic virtual meetings where directors can effectively participate from anywhere in the world. Although our international village is small, the varied nationalities of our neighbors remind us the world is both diverse and interconnected. Recruiting directors with extensive international work experience is necessary for both good governance and good performance. Today, most director searches are seeking to diversify their board composition. Such diversification should include directors who bring international experience and a worldwide outlook. Moreover, boards should consider occasionally holding their meetings abroad as well as periodically bringing global business experts into their board discussions. The boardroom needs to have a global perspective.

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