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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

Trump's Foreign Policy Legacy

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Four years ago, we wrote that Donald Trump's presidency could spell the end of an already weakened liberal international order.¹ Now that the Trump presidency is in the rearview mirror, what can we make of what transpired for U.S. foreign policy and the global order? In this essay, we review what we wrote four years ago, survey the Trump administration's foreign policy record, and assess how the Biden administration may – and may not be – constrained by Trump's foreign policy legacy.

In just four years, the Trump administration sought to dismantle and undermine a number of international institutions and agreements, including arms control, free trade, global health, and climate change. While some of these changes are ephemeral, the Trump administration may prove hugely consequential for hastening a power transition between the United States and China and precipitating wider decoupling of the two countries' economies. The failure of the United States and other governments to forge an effective collective response to the COVID-19 pandemic may unravel interconnections in travel that previously knit the world together and also undermine public confidence in governments around the world.

Yet, the American public by and large did not embrace a number of President Trump's key foreign policy positions—notably his hostility to NATO, free trade, and immigration. Surveys of U.S. foreign policy leaders also showed limited support for these positions.² Moreover, although the president succeeded in cultivating a number of high-level Republican supporters – such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Senator Lindsey Graham – to support or implement his agenda, many of Trump's foreign policy views failed to attract majority support even within the Republican party.

Although Trump failed to persuade a majority of the U.S. public to support his attack on the pillars of U.S. liberal internationalism, the Trump presidency accelerated a different threat to the United States' ability to maintain a stable and coherent foreign policy: the threat of rising partisan polarization. President Trump's relentless efforts to salt domestic divisions, accentuated by his responses to the COVID-19 crisis and his own electoral loss, may ultimately be his most lasting and important legacy, complicating the country's ability to forge coherent policies and detracting from the international appeal of America's democracy and its economic system. This domestic dysfunction and polarization, perhaps even more than the rise of a peer competitor in China, may prove to be the biggest challenge facing the Biden administration and successors in years to come.

The View from Four Years Ago

¹ Joshua Busby and Jonathan Monten, "Has Liberal Internationalism Been Trumped?" *H-Diplo* 1–6 (2017), https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/171265/issf-policy-roundtable-1-6-2017-liberal-internationalism-still#_Toc477097021; Busby and Monten, "Has Liberal Internationalism Been Trumped?" in Robert Jervis, Francis J. Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse, eds., *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018): 49–60.

² Joshua Busby et al., "Coming Together or Coming Apart? Attitudes of Foreign Policy Opinion Leaders and the Public in the Trump Era," Research (The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, March 5, 2020), <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/research/public-opinion-survey/coming-together-or-coming-apart>.

As we wrote four years ago, Trump’s approach to foreign policy politicized core elements of the liberal order, not simply the margins. We warned that Trump’s hostility to NATO, his opposition to free trade, and embrace of authoritarian leaders could potentially deliver fatal blows to key elements of the post-World War II American project.

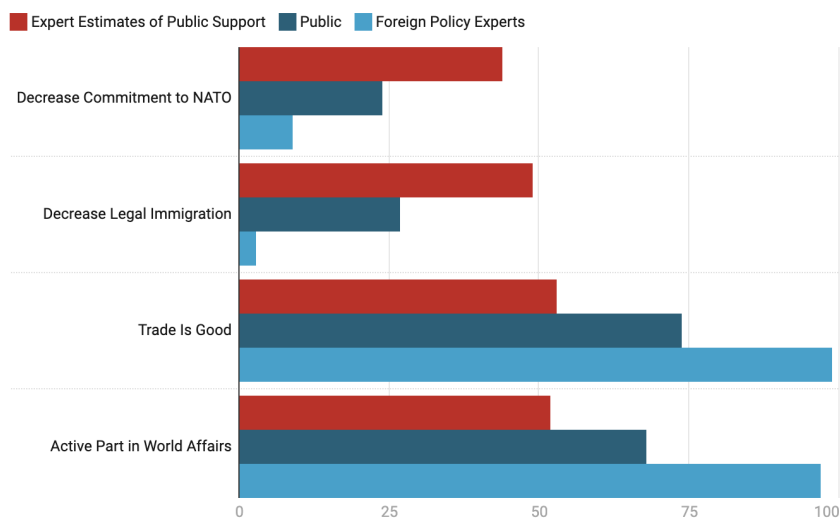
The president’s transactional approach to foreign policy suggested that long-standing relationships with allies might be re-negotiated on the basis of new bargains that suited the president’s perception of America’s interests. Trump’s version of strongman populism seemed very much on the march around the world with the emergence of similar leaders in other democracies including Brazil, Hungary, Turkey, the Philippines, and India.

Based on our survey work with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, we noted that public opinion still showed reservoirs of support for elements of the liberal order, and that despite some differences, elites still broadly supported traditional internationalist policies such as an open global economy and working through multilateral alliances like NATO.³

Trump’s Legacy

Subsequent surveys by the Chicago Council repeatedly showed that the public was generally unconvinced by key aspects of President Trump’s foreign policy agenda.⁴ As we and our colleagues argued in *Foreign Affairs* on election day 2020, “Large majorities of both the foreign policy elite and the public support internationalist positions on trade, immigration, and alliances such as NATO. Large majorities of both groups also subscribe to the belief that the United States should play an active global role” (see Figure 1 below).⁵

Support for U.S. Foreign Policy Priorities



Source: Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the University of Texas at Austin.

Figure 1: Public and Foreign Policy Leaders’ Attitudes

³ Joshua Busby et al., “How the Elite Misjudge the U.S. Electorate on International Engagement,” RealClearWorld, November 8, 2016, http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2016/11/07/how_the_elite_misjudge_the_us_electorate_on_international_engagement_112112.html.

⁴ Joshua Busby, Dina Smeltz, and Jordan Tama, “Trump and His Advisers Are Probably Wrong about What Foreign Policy Americans Want,” *Washington Post*, July 3, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/07/03/trump-his-advisers-are-probably-wrong-about-what-foreign-policy-americans-want/>.

⁵ Jonathan Monten et al., “Americans Want to Engage the World,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 3, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-11-03/americans-want-engage-world>.

Among elites, partisan differences remain, but many of these – on climate change, Iran, and Israel – reflect long-standing sources of division rather than new ones.⁶ Although Trump has likely accentuated partisan friction among leaders on how to handle China's rise, some partisan differences over how to respond to growing geostrategic tension with China would have likely occurred even without Trump in the White House.

While survey evidence suggests that public and leader support for internationalist policies has been durable, the relatively free hand the executive has on foreign policy allowed President Trump to announce a number of policy departures from his predecessor.

The U.S. has long had a habit of “exemptionalism” from international agreements and a tendency to pursue unilateral initiatives,⁷ but the Trump administration took this to the next level, with withdrawal from a variety of arms control agreements including the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear program, withdrawal from the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, and announced withdrawal from the World Health Organization in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. By the end of his presidency, Trump was a diminished figure internationally, skipping a G7 meeting in August 2020 on climate change⁸ and ducking out of most of a G20 meeting in November 2020 on the coronavirus to go play golf.⁹

Some of Trump's initiatives, like withdrawal from the Paris Agreement¹⁰ and the announced departure from the World Health Organization,¹¹ have already been undone by the new Biden administration. President Biden has also signaled a pause on the announced withdrawal of 12,000 American troops from Germany,¹² and raised the limit on refugees to 62,500 in fiscal year 2021, an increase from President Trump's 15,000, though still below the 110,000 set during the last year of the Obama presidency.¹³

However, other changes are more far-reaching and perhaps irreversible. The U.S. trade war with China disrupted trade relations between the two countries, and the souring of relations more broadly over cyber security issues, the South China Sea, treatment of the Uyghurs, among other tensions, may mean that the former degree of trade integration never recovers. With the COVID-19 crisis underscoring the risks of supply chain interdependence, the United States and China appear poised to pursue a wider partial decoupling of their

⁶ Jonathan Monten et al., “Foreign Policy Is Biden's Best Bet for Bipartisan Action, Experts Say – but GOP Is Unlikely to Join Him on Climate Change,” *The Conversation*, December 9, 2020, <http://theconversation.com/foreign-policy-is-bidens-best-bet-for-bipartisan-action-experts-say-but-gop-is-unlikely-to-join-him-on-climate-change-150508>.

⁷ Andrew Moravcsik, “The Paradox of US Human Rights Policy,” in *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, ed. Michael Ignatieff (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 147–97.

⁸ Kevin Liptak, “Trump Skips G7 Climate Summit with Aides Claiming Scheduling Conflict - CNN Politics,” CNN, August 26, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/26/politics/donald-trump-g7-climate-summit/index.html>.

⁹ Lauren Aratani, “Trump Skips G20 Pandemic Event to Visit Golf Club as Virus Ravages US,” *the Guardian*, November 21, 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/21/donald-trump-g20-pandemic-golf-club>.

¹⁰ Joshua Busby and Johannes Urpelainen, “What Biden Faces If He Wants to Get the Climate Change Effort Back on Track,” *Washington Post*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/21/what-biden-faces-if-he-wants-get-climate-change-effort-back-track/>.

¹¹ Emily Rauhala, “Biden to Reengage with World Health Organization, Will Join Global Vaccine Effort,” *Washington Post*, accessed February 13, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/biden-administration-who-covax/2021/01/20/3ddc25ce-5a8c-11eb-aaad-93988621dd28_story.html.

¹² Helene Cooper, “Biden Freezes Trump's Withdrawal of 12,000 Troops From Germany,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/04/us/politics/biden-germany-troops-trump.html>.

¹³ Priscilla Alvarez, “Biden Administration to Propose Significant Increase in Refugees Admitted to US,” CNN, February 6, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/05/politics/refugee-cap-biden/index.html>.

economies.¹⁴ More broadly, trade disputes have weakened the World Trade Organization, leaving its incoming director general Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala facing a global trading order in crisis.¹⁵

The COVID-19 crisis created the greatest challenge to the world perhaps since the Second World War, and global efforts to contain (and respond to) the virus were largely ineffective, as countries closed borders and focused on their own internal situations.¹⁶ Rife with domestic divisions and a leadership that downplayed the virus, the United States did not perform well in its public health response, accounting for a disproportionate global share of infections and deaths.

Come Home America and Go Forth

The Biden administration faces the two simultaneous challenges of national recovery at home and global problems like COVID-19 and climate change abroad. While the former reinforces the need for the U.S. to get its domestic house in order, these international challenges cannot be ignored.

While foreign policy experts typically look to the external landscape for the biggest national security threats facing the country, the lack of internal cohesion may be the biggest impediment facing the United States, even before the insurrection that assaulted the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2020, and was fomented by President Trump himself.¹⁷

While the notion of politics stopping at the water's edge was always something of a myth,¹⁸ there has been some continuity between U.S. administrations on the fundamental pillars of U.S. foreign policy, such as trade policy, alliance commitments, and, more recently, counter-terrorism. Many international relations scholars argue that democracies are more credible partners for cooperation because though they are slow to make agreements, internal checks and balances ensure that commitments once made are durable.¹⁹ However, what if the United States is increasingly incapable of making credible commitments?

As Kenneth A. Schultz warns, "As the parties become more ideologically distinct, there is a danger of greater swings from one administration to the next if the party in power changes. And as Congress loses its bipartisan center, it becomes less of a stabilizing force to keep swings in check."²⁰ As other inter-mestic issues like climate change increase in salience, and partisan division intrudes into more aspects of U.S. foreign policy, there is greater risk of partisan oscillation in U.S. foreign policy as the presidency rotates between parties.

¹⁴ Bloomberg, "U.S.-China Decoupling Raises Risks for European Firms," January 13, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-14/u-s-china-decoupling-raises-risks-for-european-firms>.

¹⁵ Concepción de León, "Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala Set to Become W.T.O.'s First Female Leader," *The New York Times*, February 5, 2021, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/business/ngozi-okonjo-iweala-world-trade-organization.html>.

¹⁶ Joshua Busby, "What International Relations Tells Us about COVID-19," *E-International Relations* (blog), April 26, 2020, <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/04/26/what-international-relations-tells-us-about-covid-19/>.

¹⁷ Joshua Busby et al., "Coming Together or Coming Apart? Attitudes of Foreign Policy Opinion Leaders and the Public in the Trump Era," Research (The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, March 5, 2020), <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/research/public-opinion-survey/coming-together-or-coming-apart>.

¹⁸ Brian C. Rathbun, "Is Liberal Internationalism Still Alive?," *H-Diplo* 1-6 (2017), https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/171265/issf-policy-roundtable-1-6-2017-liberal-internationalism-still#_Toc477097023; Rathbun, "Does Structure Trump All? A Teste of Agency in World Politics," in Robert Jervis, Francis J. Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse, eds., *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018): 49-60.

¹⁹ John R. Oneal and Bruce Russett, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000).

²⁰ Kenneth A. Schultz, "Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy," *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 7-28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1406705>.

The international image of the United States declined precipitously during the Trump administration.²¹ Though the U.S. has observed such swings in its popularity before, notably during the George W. Bush administration and the Iraq war, it remains to be seen whether international partners will have confidence that President Biden can deliver on his commitments and that those will have staying power beyond his administration.

Here, developing a consistent approach to China's rise could prove especially tricky. There is increased appreciation of more adversarial relations with China across the political spectrum. In our 2020 survey, we found that most foreign policy leaders expected that major action would be likely in the next two years to counter China's rise and that those expecting action thought it would be bipartisan.²²

However, this survey also contains some sources of partisan division, with Republicans being much more hawkish on containing China's rise than Democrats.²³ If the boundaries of China policy, like other elements of U.S. foreign policy, become a major source of partisan differentiation, Republicans will be tempted to outbid the Democrats with an anti-China policy as a means of winning the presidency.

If Democrats feel that poses a political risk to them, that could contribute to a bipartisan hardening of the U.S. approach to China policy that makes cooperation on shared challenges like climate change more difficult. Alternatively, we could see partisan sorting on China policy. Thus far, the public has largely been slower than elites to see China as a threat. However, in the wake of disputes during the last administration and more overt anti-China rhetoric from the previous president, that is starting to change, as U.S. public perceptions of China deteriorated, particularly among Republicans.²⁴

On some level, this pales in comparison to the internal challenges the Biden administration faces to deal with the COVID-19 crisis and get its own economic house in order. That is not simply an internal challenge. China largely was able to get the pandemic under control and return to normal economic activity. Meanwhile, the U.S. economy is in a state of suspended animation as citizens' lives and livelihoods remain disrupted as of early 2021. As we know, countries can respond to a rising challenger through two primary means, internal balancing and external balancing. Polarization and a weak post-COVID-19 economic recovery complicate the U.S. ability to counter China through internal balancing.

America's domestic problems – including partisan polarization, the lingering effects of the pandemic, racial inequities in policing and public health, and the emergent threat of right-wing extremism – pose grave threats to the country's ability to forge coherent economic and social policies at home. Those risks for the United States include delayed economic recovery that hastens a power transition from the United States to China. Worryingly, the longer it takes for the United States and the rest of the world to deal with the COVID-19 crisis, the greater the risk the virus can take hold and mutate beyond current vaccine technology.

The Biden administration thus has to put its own house in order through a more robust effort to address the COVID-19 crisis and stimulate an economic recovery. This will have international implications for the country's ability to counter a rising challenge from China. Given that contemporary challenges like COVID-19 and climate change cannot be resolved by any single country, the Biden administration will not have the luxury of purely turning inwards. Given that the former president himself over four years cultivated grievances and domestic divisions that culminated with his own supporters assaulting the U.S. capitol, the Biden administration will have its work cut out for it.

²¹ Richard Wike, Janell Fetterolf, and Mara Mordecai, "U.S. Image Plummet Internationally as Most Say Country Has Handled Coronavirus Badly," *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project* (blog), September 15, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/09/15/us-image-plummet-internationally-as-most-say-country-has-handled-coronavirus-badly/>.

²² Monten et al., "Foreign Policy Is Biden's Best Bet for Bipartisan Action, Experts Say – but GOP Is Unlikely to Join Him on Climate Change."

²³ Craig Kafura et al., "Divisions on US-China Policy: Opinion Leaders and the Public," Research, Chicago Council on Global Affairs (The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, February 1, 2021), <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/research/public-opinion-survey/divisions-us-china-policy-opinion-leaders-and-public>.

²⁴ Dina Smeltz and Craig Kafura, "Do Republicans and Democrats Want a Cold War with China?," Research, Chicago Council on Global Affairs (The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, October 13, 2020), <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/research/public-opinion-survey/do-republicans-and-democrats-want-cold-war-china>.

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