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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

Reclaiming America and Its Place in the World

Essay by Elizabeth Economy, Stanford University and the Council on Foreign Relations

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In his video address before the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2020, President Donald Trump summed up his views on the COVID-19 pandemic: the world must hold China accountable for covering up the virulence of the virus; the United States had effectively mobilized its resources to meet the challenge; and the world's leaders should follow the example of the United States by putting their own citizens first and rejecting the pursuit of "global ambitions."¹ The president's remarks, coming at a time when the virus was ravaging the world, and in particular the United States, were jarring but unsurprising. For several months, the president had blamed mounting U.S. deaths on collusion between China and the World Health Organization (WHO). He had also announced that the United States, which provided approximately 15 percent of the WHO's total funding, would withdraw its financial support and terminate its participation in the organization over the WHO's failure to undertake a set of unspecified reforms.² And just prior to his UNGA appearance, the president confirmed that the United States would not participate in the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access Facility (COVAX), an initiative sponsored by the UN and several international organizations to help vaccine manufacturers ensure equitable access to safe and effective vaccines for all countries.³

President Trump's disinterest in leading the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic was matched by a similar reluctance to lead at home. Instead of providing the model for how to address the pandemic, the United States—the world's largest economy, leading scientific power, and champion of democracy—delivered an unscientific, chaotic, and ultimately deadly response. The president called the virus the "Democrats' new hoax," politicized the distribution of state aid, ignored medical officials' advice on the necessity of masks and social distancing, and was slow to ramp up production of personal protective equipment, leaving doctors and other frontline medical professionals unprotected.⁴ The president also did little to ameliorate the political and racial polarization that flared throughout the pandemic. Instead, his often-inflammatory rhetoric and insistence on labeling the virus "the China virus" or "Kung flu" exacerbated tensions and likely contributed to the dramatic increase in attacks against Asian Americans.⁵

Writing in *Slate* magazine in April 2020, political commentator Fred Kaplan gave voice to the fear of many Americans and U.S. allies that the COVID-19 pandemic would mark the "final shift of global power away from the United States." Kaplan underscored the pivotal point that although President Trump's retreat from traditional U.S. foreign policy may have made allies and partners yearn for a return to

¹ Alex Ward, "Trump at the UN: America is Good, China Is bad," *Vox*, September 22, 2020; <https://www.vox.com/world/2020/9/22/21450727/trump-unga-speech-2020-full-text-china>.

² Andrew Joseph and Helen Branswell, "Trump: U.S. Will Terminate Relationship with the World Health Organization in Wake of Covid-19 Pandemic," *Stat*, May 29, 2020; <https://www.statnews.com/2020/05/29/trump-us-terminate-who-relationship/>.

³ Scott Neuman, "U.S. Won't Join WHO-Led Coronavirus Vaccine Effort, White House Says," *NPR*, September 2, 2020; <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/09/02/908711419/u-s-wont-join-who-led-coronavirus-vaccine-effort-white-house-says>.

⁴ Lauren Egan, "Trump Calls Coronavirus Democrats' 'New Hoax'," *NBC*, February 28, 2020; <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-calls-coronavirus-democrats-new-hoax-n1145721>.

⁵ Charles Davis, "Trump 'Seemingly Legitimising' the Rise in Hate Crimes Against Asian Americans, According to a UN Report," October 15, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/un-report-trump-seemingly-legitimizing-hate-crimes-against-asian-americans-2020-10?r=US&IR=T>.

U.S. leadership, the failure of the U.S. to respond effectively to the pandemic at home had led it to the “brink of irrelevance” by undermining the essential element of leadership: the ability of the United States to inspire by virtue of its model.⁶ For the rest of the world, the U.S. response, both domestically and on the global stage, raised several profound questions: Had the international community just witnessed the end of U.S. leadership of the rules-based order? Was the American model of liberal democracy irrevocably broken? And what lay in wait? Was China ready and able to replace the United States—as world leader, political model, or both?

The Trump Doctrine

President Trump’s response to the pandemic reflected the broader trends in U.S. foreign policy that he set in motion during the first years of his administration. Adopting the mantra of “America First,” President Trump argued that the United States had sacrificed its own interests in support of others—that it had maintained an unfair share of the burden of global security and that others had taken advantage of the United States through unfair trade deals. He viewed allies and multilateralism as constraints on American power rather than as enablers of U.S. influence, casting the European Union as a competitor rather than a partner and NATO as a drain on U.S. financial wherewithal.⁷ And he introduced a transactional and unpredictable approach to diplomatic engagement that opened a fresh page in America foreign policy in which everything appeared open to negotiation.

“America First” translated immediately into a dramatic shift in U.S. foreign policy. On just his third day in office, President Trump withdrew from the end-stage negotiations around the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the 12-nation trade deal that would have been the largest regional trade accord in history. He also threatened to withdraw troops from Japan and South Korea if the two countries did not increase their financial share of maintaining the alliance. In short order, he began the process of withdrawing the United States from the 2016 Paris Climate Agreement and pulled the United States out of the International Postal Union, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), and the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear agreement with Iran, and raised the possibility of withdrawing the United States from the World Trade Organization and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As he stated in a 2019 speech before the United Nations General Assembly, “The future does not belong to globalists; the future belongs to patriots.”⁸

Not all ties were cut. Despite President Trump’s disinterest in multilateral institutions and alliances, many of his foreign policy advisers believed that the United States should continue to uphold the current rules-based order. Senior administration officials and members of Congress stressed to allies, particularly within Asia, that the United States placed a high value on its strategic partnerships and that the United States remained committed to its Asian allies. The officials traveled widely throughout Asia, reiterating calls for a rules-based order, freedom of navigation, free trade, and political freedoms. In particular, they worked closely with Japan, Australia, and India to revive and energize the 2007 Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) initiative. Nonetheless, without leadership from the top, U.S. relationships throughout Asia remained tenuous.

President Trump’s domestic governance approach also diminished the United States’ global standing. The president attacked basic freedoms such as the freedom of the press and encouraged voter suppression; the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol in many respects epitomized the president’s failure to support democracy and the rule of law during his tenure.⁹ President Trump also exalted brutal authoritarian leaders such as Russia’s Vladimir Putin, North Korea’s Kim Jong Un, and China’s Xi Jinping, leading former French official Manuel Reinert to note that when the Trump administration “coddle[s] violent authoritarian leaders while condemning others on human rights grounds, its moral compass becomes clouded. The US needs to lead by example.”¹⁰ Even before the pandemic, international

⁶ Fred Kaplan, “The End of American Leadership,” *Slate*, April 13, 2020; <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/04/american-leadership-coronavirus-china.html>.

⁷ Nicholas Burns, “Trump Violates Diplomacy’s Golden Rule,” *The Atlantic*, December 4, 2019; <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/at-nato-summit-trump-abuses-americas-closest-friends/602959/>.

⁸ “Trump tells U.S.: ‘The Future Does Not Belong to Globalists’,” *CBS*, September 24, 2019; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wJ8tdxDVgl>.

⁹ Julia Jacobo, “A Visual Timeline on How the Attack on Capitol Hill Unfolded,” *ABC*, January 10, 2021; <https://abcnews.go.com/US/visual-timeline-attack-capitol-hill-unfolded/story?id=75112066>.

¹⁰ Manuel Reinert, “America’s Democratic Shortcomings and the Liberal International Order,” *E-International Relations*, November 13, 2020; <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/11/13/opinion-americas-democratic-shortcomings-and-the-liberal-international-order/>.

perceptions of President Trump were overwhelmingly negative. In spring 2019, a survey of 32 countries revealed that a median of 64 percent had no confidence in U.S. president, even as 54 percent still retained a favorable view of the United States.¹¹ By summer 2020, however, confidence in Trump had plunged even further to 16 percent, and the favorability of the United States had fallen to 34 percent.¹²

The China Factor

President Trump's abdication of U.S. global leadership left a significant vacuum that Chinese President Xi Jinping did not hesitate to try to fill. Although Xi had previously claimed leadership on global climate change and globalization, he had not delivered results in a meaningful way. The COVID-19 pandemic offered Xi another chance to lead the world in responding to a global challenge and to demonstrate the merit of its development model. China's aggressive and effective campaign to control the spread of the virus domestically enabled it to open up faster than any other major economy. Once it controlled the virus within its own borders, it became the most important source of personal protective equipment for the rest of the world, provided teams of doctors and medical equipment to scores of countries, and served, at least initially, as the most important source of vaccines for many countries throughout the developing world.

China's success and the U.S.'s failure in responding quickly and effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic created a sense within China—and in other parts of the world as well—that China was on a trajectory to surpass the United States in not only economic power but also political influence. As Xi and other officials reiterated with increasing frequency: “the East is rising and the West is declining.”¹³ Nonetheless, China's lack of transparency around the origins of the virus, aggressive “wolf warrior” diplomacy, human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and repressive approach to Hong Kong undermined much of the soft power it otherwise might have garnered from its COVID-19 leadership.¹⁴ Instead of applause for its assistance, China received criticism for its bullying behavior and human rights practices.

The United States 2.0

At the conclusion of his *Slate* piece, Kaplan held out a sliver of hope that American leadership could still prevail if Donald Trump did not. Trump's 2020 election loss and Joe Biden's win, however, do not guarantee that the United States will regain all or part of its moral authority and standing as a global leader. President Biden made such ambition a central element of his foreign policy strategy and has articulated an approach that is rooted in democratic values and centered on allies, partners, and multilateral institutions. The administration's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance also underscored in bold print a determination to “earn back our position of leadership in international institutions...”¹⁵ Biden has called for a summit of democracies, a climate summit, and for democratic partnership on setting technology standards to ensure shared norms around Internet openness, data privacy, and security. Within the first two months of the Biden presidency, the United States confirmed its continued membership in the Paris Climate Agreement, rejoined the UNHRC and the WHO, and attempted to restart negotiations over Iran's nuclear program.

The president has also taken steps to signal the priority of alliances in its foreign policy. His first significant international engagement was a virtual summit with the Quad members, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, Prime Minister Scott Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga of Japan. Together the leaders agreed to support an initiative to provide one billion vaccine doses for

¹¹ Richard Wike, Jacob Poushter, Janell Fetterolf, and Shannon Schumacher, “Trump Ratings Remain Low Around Globe, While Views of U.S. Stay Mostly Favorable,” Pew Research Center, January 8, 2020; <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/01/08/trump-ratings-remain-low-around-globe-while-views-of-u-s-stay-mostly-favorable/>.

¹² Richard Wike, Janell Fetterolf, and Mara Mordecai, “U.S. Image Plummets Internationally as Most Say Country Has Handled Coronavirus Badly,” Pew Research Center, September 15, 2020; <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/09/15/us-image-plummets-internationally-as-most-say-country-has-handled-coronavirus-badly/>.

¹³ William Zhang, “China's Officials Play up 'Rise of the East, Decline of the West,’” *South China Morning Post*, March 9, 2021; <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3124752/chinas-officials-play-rise-east-decline-west>.

¹⁴ Yun Sun, “China's ‘Wolf Warrior’ Diplomacy in the COVID-19 Crisis,” *The ASAN Forum* 9:2 (March-April 2021); <http://www.theasanforum.org/chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy-in-the-covid-19-crisis/>.

¹⁵ The White House, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” March 2021; <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

South and Southeast Asia.¹⁶ The initiative represents a fundamentally new model of partnership, in which the United States and Japan will provide the financing, India will manufacture the Johnson and Johnson vaccine, and the United States and Australia will lead on delivery of the vaccine.

Building new bridges with Europe, where some countries are now calling for “strategic autonomy,” may be more challenging.¹⁷ In his speech before the February 2021 Munich Security Conference, Biden stated, “The partnership between Europe and the United States, in my view, is and must remain the cornerstone of all that we hope to accomplish in the 21st century, just as we did in the 20th century.”¹⁸ And the next month, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken traveled to Europe to meet with the United States’ NATO partners, and delivered a speech in which he acknowledged that trust among the allies had been “shaken.” Nonetheless, he called for a renewed allied commitment based on shared democratic values and confronting external threats like China and Russia, as well as transnational challenges¹⁹

The credibility of U.S. leadership will depend above all on repairing the damage to the United States’ democratic model. At the March meeting in Anchorage, Alaska between senior Chinese and American officials, senior Chinese foreign policy advisor Yang Jiechi underscored the weaknesses in the U.S. model, asserting, “Many people in the United States have little confidence in the democracy of the United States,” and he criticized U.S. human rights practices, including the failure to address the concerns of Black Americans. (At the same time, Yang highlighted the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) economic achievements, success in responding to the pandemic, and the Chinese people’s support for their government²⁰). The Biden administration’s Interim National Security Strategic Guidance directly addresses Yang’s criticism by underscoring the importance of healing the polarized American nation, ensuring equitable and inclusive growth, and providing investment to encourage innovation, good-paying jobs, and American supply chains for critical goods. According to Biden, all are essential to regaining America’s global authority. In addition, the administration has proposed a massive new infrastructure bill that will help address these issues.²¹ These are only first steps, however, in rebuilding the United States and the world’s trust in it.

Although competition between the United States and China around values, norms, and policy preferences will be fierce, there is also the potential for the two countries to find common ground and purpose. At the conclusion of the Anchorage summit, Secretary Blinken suggested that despite the fact that the two sides are “fundamentally at odds,” there is room for cooperation on North Korea, Iran, Afghanistan, and climate change.²² Such efforts are unlikely to ameliorate the great power competition underway, but they could be a powerful force in helping ensure global peace and stability.

¹⁶ “First Quad Summit: One Billion Vaccine Doses for Asia, Cooperation on Approach to China,” *The Wire*, March 13, 2021; <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/first-quad-summit-vaccine-asia-chinese-activities>.

¹⁷ Richard Youngs, “The EU’s Strategic Autonomy Trap,” Carnegie Europe, March 8, 2021; <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/03/08/eu-strategic-autonomy-trap-pub-83955>.

¹⁸ Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference, February 19, 2021; <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/19/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-2021-virtual-munich-security-conference/>.

¹⁹ Anthony Blinken, “Reaffirming and Reimagining America’s Alliances,” Speech at NATO Headquarters, March 24, 2021; <https://ru.usembassy.gov/reaffirming-and-reimagining-americas-alliances-speech-by-secretary-blinken-at-nato-headquarters/>.

²⁰ “How it happened: Transcript of the US-China Opening Remarks in Alaska,” *Nikkei Asia*, March 19, 2021; <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/US-China-tensions/How-it-happened-Transcript-of-the-US-China-opening-remarks-in-Alaska>.

²¹ Javier Zarracina, Joey Garrison, and George Petras, “Joe Biden Wants to Spend \$2 trillion on Infrastructure and Jobs. These 4 Charts Show Where the Money Would Go,” *USA Today*, April 1, 2021; <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/politics/2021/04/01/2-trillion-infrastructure-bill-charts-detail-bidens-plan/4820227001/>.

²² Humeyra Pamuk, David Brunnstrom, Michael Martina, “‘Tough’ U.S.-China Talks Signal Rocky Start to Relations under Biden,” *Reuters*, March 19, 2021; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-alaska/tough-u-s-china-talks-signal-rocky-start-to-relations-under-biden-idUSKBN2BB216>.

Conclusion

The damage President Trump and his administration inflicted on the fabric of U.S. standing in the world and its relations with its allies and partners was profound. However, it may not be irreparable. Pew polls undertaken early in the Biden administration, for example, signal significant optimism among citizens in Germany, France, and the UK concerning both President Biden and the United States. Fully 84 percent of citizens in Germany and France, as well as 72 percent of those in the UK report feeling “generally optimistic” about relations with the United States. Equally important, the percentage of those who have confidence in President Biden to do the right thing range from 65 percent in the UK to 79 percent in Germany. This marks a vast improvement from the less than 20 percent confidence earned by President Trump in all three countries.²³

China’s ability to lead—much less to replace the United States—depends, in turn, not only on its willingness and capability to assume the mantle of global leadership but also on the strength of its domestic model and the desire of other countries to follow. Global polling suggests that China lags significantly behind the United States, the European Union, and Japan as a trusted partner or model. A fall 2020 survey of Southeast Asian elites revealed that more than 63 percent did not trust China as a strategic partner while over 67 percent trusted Japan; moreover, 61 percent favored aligning with the United States over China if they were forced to choose.²⁴ Similarly, among the world’s advanced democracies in Asia, North America, and Europe, negative views of China jumped precipitously from 2019 to late 2020, even as China was leading the global pandemic response. Across all fourteen countries surveyed, the percentage of citizens expressing “no confidence in Xi Jinping to do the right thing,” ranged from 70 percent in the Netherlands to 84 percent in Japan.²⁵

There is no returning to the pre-Trump global status quo. China’s relative gain in power, Europe’s calls for strategic autonomy, and the United States’ own changed understanding of its domestic and international priorities have created a new balance of power. Nonetheless, global opinion polls, as well as the early successes of the Biden administration in forging consensus with Asian and European allies on the pandemic response and Chinese human rights abuses, suggest that room remains for the United States to lead on the global stage. The long-term viability of this leadership, however, will depend both on the Biden administration fulfilling its near-term objectives of domestic renewal as well as consistency in the U.S. commitment to allies and institutions in the post-Biden era.

Elizabeth Economy is Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and Senior Fellow for China Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. She is the author of the forthcoming book *The World According to China* (Polity Press, 2021), as well as several other books, most recently *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (Oxford University Press, 2018). She sits on the boards of Swarthmore College, The Asia Foundation, and the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations.

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²³ Richard Eike, Janell Fetterolf, and Christine Huang, “British, French and German Publics Give Biden High Marks After U.S. Election,” Pew Research Center, January 19, 2021; <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/01/19/british-french-and-german-publics-give-biden-high-marks-after-u-s-election/>.

²⁴ ISEAS, “The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report,” February 10, 2021; <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>.

²⁵ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, “Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries,” Pew Research Center, October 6, 2020; <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>.