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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

Trump's Limited Legacy

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Donald Trump's final disgraceful weeks in office displayed him at his narcissistic worst, encouraging the storming of the Capitol by his supporters, and leaving a legacy of damaging claims about the electoral process that will take time to dispel. Though the manner of his going was shocking it was not surprising. Inflammatory rhetoric, extravagant promises, and disdain for convention, had all been present in his election campaign. They were at the fore in his January 2017 inauguration address. And so it continued. In the essay I wrote in the summer of 2018 I noted Trump's "embrace of nationalist impulses, his contempt for his political opponents and the rule of law, his incessant boastful, malevolent, and false statements, his lack of empathy and curiosity."¹ There was no drift back to the center. His strategy for a second term involved enthusing his supporters by continuing as before rather than reaching out to doubters. It almost worked.

For America's allies and partners a president in this mode was frustrating and alarming. The mantle of 'leader of the Free World' might hark back to a simpler geopolitical time but the idea that the U.S. president should exemplify the virtues of Western democracies and uphold the international institutions was deeply embedded. It certainly came as a shock to come up against an individual who did not see his role in that way. They shared the hope of the foreign policy establishment in the United States that somehow Trump would be sufficiently awed by the responsibilities of the office and allow his rough edges to be smoothed over by those appointed to the key posts in the State and Defense Departments, as well as the White House.

At first Trump at least seemed interested in meeting the leaders of those states, especially if they were male and played golf, or put on a good parade, but he soon realized they sought continuity while he wanted change. Trump was opposed to free trade and alliances, believing them to have required excessive concessions and subsidies by the U.S., saw his fellow Western leaders as soft and feckless, envied the power available to authoritarian leaders to remove all obstacles to staying in power, insisted that only his version of events was true and all others were 'fake,' viewed all political relationships in transactional terms, and insisted that he could do the best deals.²

With every move he made – on moving the U.S. Embassy to Israel to Jerusalem, abandoning the Paris climate change targets, walking away from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal with Iran – the allies opposed and refused to follow. Soon they were largely into damage limitation, hoping that Trump would turn out to be a one-term President and that something of the established international order could be preserved for when normality returned. Although Trump mused aloud at one point about the possibility of withdrawing from NATO he was dissuaded from taking such a step.³ Could he have resisted the temptation for the entirety of a second term?

¹ Lawrence Freedman, "Authentic Trump versus the Trump Administration: Donald Trump as Foreign Policy Disrupter," 18 July 2018; <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5BH.pdf>.

² A number of books told similar stories about Trump's views and conduct as president, including Michael Wolff, *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, (New York: Henry Holt, 2018); Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), Anonymous, *A Warning*, (New York: Twelve, 2020).

³ Brooke Lapping Productions, *Trump Takes on The World, Episode 1*, Broadcast on BBC, 27 February 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000s5zl>.

Allied leaders and Trump's foreign policy team colluded in damage control by pretending that there was more continuity in U.S. foreign policy than was in fact the case. The stories of the first eighteen months were of Cabinet members and White House staff developing stratagems to keep Trump occupied and take advantage of his inattention to avoid implementing what they believed to be his more harmful policies. One intriguing counter-factual is what might have happened if Trump had mastered the detail of policy, ensured that loyal and competent staff stayed with him all the way, and concentrated on the process sufficiently to ensure that his will was enforced. One can look back at the 2017 National Security Strategy and see elements of an approach based on 'America First,' including taking seriously great power competition and encouraging a rebalancing of the international trading and alliance systems, which would have required a degree of adjustment from other countries.⁴ Trump often had grounds for his complaints – China's unfair trading practices for example, or the reluctance of European governments to raise their defense spending.

Trump therefore provided an interesting case study of the ways in which the bureaucracy can thwart and distract a president, especially one who does not understand how to use the available levers of power. The churn in staff, and the reluctance of qualified people to join the administration, meant that the White House became less effective even if more attuned to his wishes after the 2018 Congressional elections. His desire to get troops out of Afghanistan, for example, had widespread support. This was opposed successfully by the national security establishment. It was still opposed when Joe Biden became president in January 2021. Yet Biden knew how to make it happen. The great coronavirus pandemic of 2020, which was an opportunity to forge national unity against a shared threat and show competence where it mattered, was poorly handled because Trump did not want to accept the economic costs of controlling the disease. Instead, he continually promised that everything was under control, while proposing quack remedies, only to be caught out by the spread of cases.⁵

While an unremitting focus on calculations of power and interest might be seen as the hallmarks of a 'realist' approach, describing situations as you wish them to be rather than how they are is hardly realistic, and this tendency led to inappropriate policy choices. This can be seen in the two important nuclear nonproliferation calls made by Trump that I discussed in 2018. He made two big calls that summer. After abandoning the JCPOA to restrict Iran's nuclear program and preparing to re-instate severe sanctions, he met in Singapore on 12 June 2018 with Kim Jong-un to agree on North Korea's 'denuclearization.'

Offering summits to apparently implacable foes was perfectly in line with Trump's belief in himself as the 'master of the deal.' Even after lambasting Iran at the 2017 United Nations General Assembly ("a corrupt dictatorship behind the false guise of a democracy") he decided on a whim to seek an immediate meeting with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in his New York hotel room. French president Emmanuel Macron was enlisted to act as a go-between.⁶ The Iranians dismissed the idea as an insult. Even if they had been tempted, they knew how badly any meeting would have gone down with the hardliners back in Teheran. That should have been a clue that if the U.S. abandoned the JCPOA the Iranians would not be interested in granting Trump any concessions that he could turn into a victory. As it had been difficult enough to get the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei to agree to the first deal, it was going to be even harder to get him to agree to a second, just after the U.S. had walked away from the commitments made in 2015 without being able to point to instances of Iranian non-compliance.

The JCPOA had not led to a wider détente. Iran had not reduced its interventions in regional affairs, and this was one reason why local American partners (who also happened to be close to Trump), such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) supported this hostile stance. In 2018 I raised questions, without answers, as to whether there was a risk of escalation to an all-out regional war, how far the administration would push for regime change in Iran, and whether the pressure might aggravate its internal weaknesses sufficiently to coerce into a more compliant stance. The administration, however, asked for too much for a serious negotiation. It made

⁴ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, (The White House: December 2017), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

⁵ Christian Paz, "All the President's Lies About the Coronavirus: An Unfinished Compendium of Trump's Overwhelming Dishonesty during a National Emergency," *The Atlantic*, (November 2, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/11/trumps-lies-about-coronavirus/608647/>.

⁶ *Trump Takes on The World, Episode 2*, Broadcast on BBC, 4 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000sct9>.

demands that Teheran was never likely to accept, requiring it not only to accept greater restrictions on its nuclear facilities, but also to abandon its activist foreign policy. The logic of the U.S. position, reinforced by severe economic sanctions, pointed to regime change.⁷

The other parties to the JCPOA, including the major European countries, sought to sustain it. Iran responded by enriching its uranium to even higher levels and producing more of it. With sanctions biting in 2019 it began to lash out, attacking tankers and, through its Yemeni proxies, facilities in Saudi Arabia. At one point, after a U.S. drone had been shot down in June 2019, which Trump described as a 'big mistake', a retaliatory military strike on several Iranian radar and missile sites was ordered by Trump but then withdrawn at the last minute, against the advice of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, National Security Adviser John Bolton, and CIA Director Gina Haspel.⁸ This was an interesting example of Trump's equivocal attitude to the use of force. In this case he was worried about civilian casualties, yet he also eased rules of engagement for drone strikes and backed use of the so-called 'mother of all bombs' - GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast - against Islamic State cave complex in Afghanistan in April 2017.⁹ At the start of 2020 he struck a real blow against the Iranian regime when he approved the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the leader the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the man responsible for Iranian overseas operations. This was followed attacks by Iranian proxies on U.S. bases in Iraq.¹⁰

One of the few foreign policy achievements of Trump's administration was to use the shared enmity with Iran to forge a new set of relationships between Israel and the Arab states. This led to the August 2020 Abraham Accords, which saw the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain normalise diplomatic relations with Israel, with others, such as Sudan, indicating that they might follow.¹¹ This was done despite a lack of progress on the Israeli- Palestinian dispute, where Trump had promised that his son-in-law Jared Kushner could achieve a historic breakthrough but failed to do so. The only benefit to the Palestinians from the accords was that Israel held back from annexing territory on the West Bank.

Trump put his greatest personal effort into reversing North Korea's nuclear program. In 2018 he sent word (through a UN official) about a possible meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.¹² The North Koreans wanted a summit. The leader of a small, poor, and oppressive country was pleased to meet on equal terms with the U.S. president. When a formal proposal was made through the South Koreans, whose leader, President Moon Jae-in, wanted to revive intra-Korean talks, Trump accepted with alacrity. Internationally there was surprise but also relief, as 2017 had been marked by a vicious war of words over the North's nuclear weapon and missile tests. The president clearly enjoyed the drama and the attention when the two men met in Singapore. I warned at the time that the risks of the summit lay "not in diplomacy, unless concessions to the North become excessive, but the consequences of an eventual U.S. discovery that North Korea has no intention of denuclearizing except in unlikely conditions." There was never much chance that Kim would agree to dismantle the only asset that gave him any international standing, and so it proved. Trump spoke of his attachment to the young tyrant in terms more appropriate for a teenage romance,¹³ but by the end of his term no substantive progress had been made.

⁷ Secretary of State Mike Pompeo: "what can change is that people can change the government. What we're trying to do is create space for the Iranian people," cited in Philip H. Gordon, *Losing the Game: The False Promise of Regime Change in the Middle East*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2021), p. 5

⁸ Michael Shear, Eric Schmitt, Michael Crowley, Maggie Haberman, "Strikes on Iran Approved by Trump, Then Abruptly Pulled Back," *New York Times*, (June 20, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/20/world/middleeast/iran-us-drone.html>.

⁹ Helene Cooper and Mujib Mashal, "U.S. Drops 'Mother of All Bombs' on ISIS Caves in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/world/asia/moab-mother-of-all-bombs-afghanistan.html>. Trump had relaxed the rules of engagement. It is not clear that he formally authorised this operation.

¹⁰ Cooper, Schmitt, Haberman, Rukmini Callimachi, "As Tensions With Iran Escalated, Trump Opted for Most Extreme Measure," *New York Times*, January 4, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/04/us/politics/trump-suleimani.html>.

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, *The Abraham Accords Declaration*, <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>.

¹² *Trump Takes on The World, Episode 3*, Broadcast on BBC, 11 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000sln7>.

¹³ "Trump hails 'very beautiful letter' from Kim and says additional talks likely," *Guardian*, August 9, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/09/trump-kim-jong-un-letter-talks>.

One consequence of the direct diplomacy between the U.S. and North Korea is that Trump no longer needed China to pressure Kim into making concessions. It is important to recall that Trump made a big pitch to impress the Chinese leader Xi Jinping when he welcomed him to the garish splendor of his Florida retreat, Mar-a-Lago. By 2018 he was engaged in a tariff war to force changes in China's unfair trade practices. The effects were limited by the impact of China retaliatory tariffs on the U.S. agricultural sector, and Trump's readiness to pick fights with allies on trade issues (even under the guise of national security threats). Regardless of who held the presidency, there was bound to be growing tension with China at this time, as the consequences of both its economic strength and Xi's more assertive policies. China represents a serious global economic competitor to the U.S., and a geopolitical competitor, at least in what is now commonly described as the 'Indo-Pacific region.' In 2018 I observed that it was "not itching for a fight" but was happy to wait as Trump damaged the position of the United States. "Patience," I noted, was "likely to be rewarded as countries begin to lean more towards Beijing, accepting its largesse and favors in return for whatever political demands it may impose without the U.S. being able or willing to act as a counter." This now seems wrong. While Beijing sought to present itself as the new guarantor of multilateral diplomacy, in practice Xi encouraged a more aggressive diplomacy, refusing to yield on any matter of interest, and in particular showed extreme sensitivity to any criticism of his policies, such as the oppression of the Uighurs in Xinjiang province. This was further complicated by China's role as the source of COVID-19 and its claims that it had shown the way on how to stamp it out. Blaming China did not absolve other countries from their own responsibility for managing the pandemic (as Trump found) but it added to the global suspicions of Beijing.

The other large question was how Trump would deal with Russia. There were claims from the start of his presidency that Trump owed his position in part to Russian interference. The various investigations were suggestive if not conclusive. Trump clearly wanted to improve relations with Russia and was unsurprisingly ready to accept President Putin's assurances that there had been no interference. He was caught not only by the fact that those suspicions would be confirmed by his excessive warmth towards Putin, but also general wariness among Senate Republicans when it came to Russian intentions. In 2018 I wondered doubtfully whether a deal would be possible whereby sanctions were lifted in return for the separatist enclaves in Ukraine being abandoned. There was no deal. Trump reluctantly agreed to join in the diplomatic expulsions that followed the attempted poisoning in March 2018 of the former intelligence agent, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter in Salisbury in the UK.¹⁴

Even from Trump's own perspective, there were few positive achievements in the area of foreign policy. Trump can claim to have encouraged attention to the strategic challenge posed by China, to have helped improve relations between Israel and the Arab world, albeit not with the Palestinians, to have helped defeat ISIS in Iraq with U.S. allies and to have reduced its influence in Syria, to have been ready to take risks in talking to adversaries such as Kim Jong-un and in setting as a goal withdrawal from Afghanistan, even though this was not achieved. He also removed restrictions on drone attacks yet, despite his presumed belligerence, he held back from new large-scale military operations.

The underlying question I raised in 2018 was whether Trump was as aberrant as America's allies hoped. When Biden became president, he announced that America was back,¹⁵ and in many respects relations picked up where they had left off in 2016, with many individuals who had served under Obama moving into key positions. Alliances were celebrated rather than qualified. Multilateralism returned. The U.S. rejoined the Paris climate accords and the World Health Organization, and Biden ended hostility towards the International Criminal Court. His administration revived an interest in human rights and democracy as goals of foreign policy. Yet confidence in the U.S. had been shaken. Security guarantees no longer seem so reliable. It seems prudent (as Macron has argued) to develop capabilities that reduce dependence on the United States. Trump nonetheless left them wondering: what would happen with a future president with similar prejudices and policies but also more intelligence, competence, and discipline?

¹⁴ "London was pushing for the White House to expel dozens of suspected Russian operatives, but Mr. Trump was skeptical. He had initially written off the poisoning as part of legitimate spy games, distasteful but within the bounds of espionage. Some officials said they thought that Mr. Trump, who has frequently criticized 'rats' and other turncoats, had some sympathy for the Russian government's going after someone viewed as a traitor." Julian E. Barnes and Adam Goldman, "Gina Haspel Relies on Spy Skills to Connect With Trump. He Doesn't Always Listen," *New York Times*, April 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/16/us/politics/gina-haspel-trump.html>.

¹⁵ The White House, "Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World," February 04, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.

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