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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

America First? The Erosion of American Status under Trump

Essay by Michelle Murray, Bard College

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How has the Trump presidency affected the status of the United States as the leader of the current international order? When Donald Trump assumed the presidency on January 20, 2017, few could have predicted what the next four years would mean for U.S. standing in the world. What was almost certain was that Trump's approach to foreign policy would be different from his predecessors and that he would likely not be guided by the same rules, norms, and priorities that had shaped U.S. foreign policy after the Second World War. Four years later, we are in a position to take stock and think about the impact the Trump administration had on America's role in the world and the challenges and opportunities it has revealed. In one sense, Trump's foreign policy did not represent the radical departure that many feared when he first took office. While his rhetoric was mostly devoid of the outward commitment to liberal ideals that is characteristic of U.S. foreign policy discourse, there were no major wars, the U.S. did not wholly abandon its key allies, and the multilateral institutional order remains mostly intact. Nevertheless, the change in style and tone of his foreign policy represented a perhaps small, but not insignificant, change in U.S. foreign policy. Trump openly chastised allies, curried favor with dictators, and withdrew from international agreements. His brash, personalistic style eroded democratic norms at home and abroad. In short, Trump's diplomatic style and choices have affected the standing of the United States in the world. Specifically, they worked to make America *unrecognizable* to the most important members of the international community for upholding American status, close allies and friends. As a result, questions have arisen about the norms and values that underpin American identity and thus about the status of the United States as the leader of the international order going forward.

Status and International Order

Status matters in world politics because it is both an expression of state identity and a means by which the state can instantiate that identity in practice and pursue its foreign policy goals. All states have a self-understanding that is the basis of their identities, and that arises from their domestic discourses, politics, and past interactions with other states. These self-understandings are subjective—drawing from a state's particular history and reflecting the distinct vantage point from which that state engages the world and understands its place in it. A state's identity, in turn, shapes its interests and prescribes how it can achieve those interests through its foreign policy. *Status* refers to a recognized identity in a social order. States acquire status when their aspiring identity—that is, the role they want to play in international society that reinforces their self-understanding—is recognized by other relevant states, thus enabling them to enact their identities in practice.¹

States care about their status for two reasons. First, states need “a sense of biographical continuity and wholeness that is supported and recognized in and through their relations with others” in order to have a coherent and stable foreign policy.² Identities are social phenomena; they require the participation of others in order to have meaning in the world. Second, status serves this end because when a state's desired role in the international sphere is recognized, its power is legitimated. When power is legitimate, there is “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of

¹ Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 45–46. This view of status stands in contrast to predominant approaches in international relations theory, which define status as perceptions of a state's ranking on valued attributes. See, Deborah Welch Larson, T.V. Paul, and William C. Wohlforth, “Status and World Order,” in Paul, Larson and, Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

² Emmanuelle Blanc, “We Need to Talk: Trump's Electoral Rhetoric and the Role of Transnational Dialogue,” *Politics* 41:1 (2021): 113–114.

norms.”³ As a consequence, status recognition organizes interstate relations in such a way that particular states are authorized to play specific roles—in the case of the United States, a leading role—in international politics. The roles that states take on are intersubjective; that is, they only acquire meaning through interactions with other states that reproduce relations of recognition. These routinized encounters make states recognizable to each other, and in turn “make interactions between states within [the international order] predictable and stable.”⁴

Thus, the international order is, first and foremost, a kind of social order that arranges states’ relationships with each other and guides their behavior through routinized relations of recognition. At the center of this social order is the leading power, or hegemon, who by virtue of its status is able to define the rules, values and norms that constitute the system. Indeed, when a state is recognized as the leader of the international order, it is able to order the system in ways that support its vision and values, and importantly, reinforce its power. Key to the leading power’s status is the recognition it receives from its friends and closest allies, who share a common vision of the international order and make a commitment to maintain it into the future. Even more, friends identify with each other on the basis of shared history and experience, a common set of values and priorities, and faithfulness to “a shared project of world-building” that reproduces the international order and the status hierarchy that goes along with it.⁵ In this context, the relationships a leading power has with its friends—and the relations of recognition that sustain those relationships—are the principal means by which its status in the system is created and reproduced. Put simply, being a good friend is the key to maintaining standing in the world.

Trump and the Erosion of American Status

Friends share a vision of the international order that is maintained through routinized relations of recognition, which reproduce the status hierarchy that constitutes the identity role structure at the center of the order. These acts of recognition manifest in both language and in states’ foreign policy practices vis-à-vis one another.⁶ Here I will focus on one important dimension of this process—“team play”—where Trump’s tone, style and sometimes actions have destabilized the relationships upon which American status depends.

“Team play” includes a wide array of foreign policy practices—both strategic and symbolic—that reproduce state identities and with it the *shared* project of the international order.⁷ These practices range from formal commitments to work together in institutional settings to the performative rituals of diplomacy. What these different kinds of practices do politically is reiterate and reinforce the collective identity of the group and the notion that they are working together on the basis of a shared vision of the world. Both Trump’s rhetoric and foreign policy decisions called the idea of team play into question. From the start of his presidency, Trump targeted the international institutional order, withdrawing from and/or significantly cutting funding to a range of organizations. For example, he withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Paris Climate Accords, UNESCO, the Global Compact for Migration, the Iran nuclear deal, the United Nations Human Rights Council, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and the World Health Organization. He withdrew from several U.S.-Russia arms control agreements, crippled the World Trade Organization, started a trade war with the European Union (among allies and others), and routinely called into question America’s commitment to NATO. These organizations span a range of issues areas of varied importance to the United States’ core interests; Trump’s actions reflect the general disdain that he has for the international order they represent.

Moreover, Trump’s rhetoric was especially alarming to allies and is exemplary of his foreign policy approach and the damage it could do. Perhaps best captured by the “America First” slogan, the guiding principles behind Trump’s foreign policy were from the start transactional, defined by momentary exchanges of (often economic) self-interest. What is especially noteworthy about America First is not the notion that the United States would pursue its own interests or have interests that diverge from those of its important allies.

³ Marc C. Suchman, “Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches,” *Academy of Management Review* 20:3 (1995): 574.

⁴ Karl Gustafsson, “Routinised Recognition and Anxiety: Understanding the Deterioration in Sino-Japanese Relations,” *Review of International Studies* 42:4 (2016): 6.

⁵ Felix Berenskoetter and Yuri van Hoef, “Friendship and Foreign Policy,” in Cameron G. Thies, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Foreign Policy Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 749.

⁶ Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations*.

⁷ Berenskoetter and van Hoef, “Friendship and Foreign Policy,” 750.

Rather, it is that this rhetoric discursively undermined the collective sentiments at the heart of team play and suggested that the United States valued allies only insofar as they benefited its immediate, material interests. As former German Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger noted, “everyone understands [Trump] doesn’t value transatlantic relations—or he values them in a very monetary way.”⁸

In this context, the United States, and the values it represents, were framed in opposition to those of its European counterparts. For example, Trump often referred to NATO as obsolete and questioned whether the United States should promise to defend countries that were “delinquent” on meeting targets for military spending, seeming to reduce the defense organization—which symbolizes the triumph of Western liberal democracy and is arguably one of the central organizations of the international order—to zero-sum economic exchanges.⁹ Trump took a long time to publicly commit to Article 5 and suggested more than once that any defense of Europe would be conditional on payments. Trump’s fixation on NATO members’ contributions led German Chancellor Angela Merkel to suggest, “the era in which we could fully rely on others is over to some extent...we Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands,” implying an indisputable fracture in the quality of transatlantic relations.¹⁰

Similarly, Trump’s disruptive and transactional approach to trade upended several G7 meetings, which devolved into spats over retaliatory tariffs in Trump’s trade wars and made it difficult, if not impossible, for these leaders to speak of a shared ambition for the international order. After the G7 meeting in Canada in 2018, an EU diplomat who was in attendance described Trump’s behavior as “nauseating” and undermining of shared norms: “He was insulting one, insulting the other, lauding his relationship with [Korean leader] Kim [Jong-un], with [Russian President Vladimir] Putin, making the argument that Russia needs to come back to that G7 table, in such a rude, and mocking and misogynist way.”¹¹ By testing these relationships in this way, Trump “endangered the mutual recognition of the friendship identity that had been forged over time,” and that is the principal source of its status in the world.¹² Indeed, one EU official characterized the impact of Trump’s behavior most clearly when he suggested Trump’s policies were “leading at the end of the day to more fundamental questions of our common approach to a rules-based international order.”¹³

The question of America’s commitment to this shared international project was brought into sharp relief by Trump’s embrace of authoritarian leaders like Kim and Putin and their illiberal values. While Trump disrespected and alienated the close allies of the U.S., he simultaneously went out of his way to work with and accommodate nondemocratic adversaries, thus raising doubts about America’s commitment to the shared norms and values that underpin the international order. Trump embraced a number of authoritarian leaders from across the globe during his presidency. What these leaders share is a general disregard for democratic governance, human rights, freedom of the press, and the rule of law. They suppress political opposition and dissent and have a penchant for violence that stands in stark contrast to the principles that define the liberal international order. Trump repeatedly spoke warmly of his relationships with these leaders, referring to them as friends, emphasizing the respect he had for them and their leadership style, and noting that he trusted them on important national security matters.

Beyond praise, Trump even tacitly and sometimes openly condoned these leaders’ illiberal actions (sometimes on American soil). When Turkish President Recep Erdoğan ordered his security detail to attack protestors outside the Turkish embassy in Washington DC—while he looked on—Trump, “offered no public comfort to the victims of the attack, no rebuke to the perpetrators, no statement of support for

⁸ David M. Herszenhorn, “Fear and Loathing (of Donald Trump) in the EU,” *Politico* (October 9, 2020), <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-eu-fear-and-loathing/>.

⁹ Michel Rose and Estelle Shirbon, “Very, Very Nasty: Trump Clashes with Macron before NATO Summit,” *Reuters* (December 2, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-summit/very-very-nasty-trump-clashes-with-macron-before-nato-summit-idUSKBN1Y7005>.

¹⁰ Herszenhorn, “Fear and Loathing (of Donald Trump) in the EU.”

¹¹ Herszenhorn, “Fear and Loathing (of Donald Trump) in the EU.”

¹² Blanc, “We Need to Talk,” 117.

¹³ David M. Herszenhorn, “G7 and Trump: Can’t Live with Him, Can’t Live Without Him,” *Politico* (June 7, 2018), <https://www.politico.eu/article/g7-donald-trump-cant-live-with-him-cant-live-without-him/>.

the bedrock rights of free assembly and free expression.”¹⁴ When Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman authorized the brutal killing and dismemberment of Jamal Khashoggi, a US based journalist (and permanent resident) and vocal critic of the Saudi government, Trump publically contradicted his own intelligence agencies to say the cause of death may never be known. The statement was, as *The New York Times* described at the time, “a stark distillation of the Trump worldview: remorselessly transactional, heedless of the facts, determined to put America’s interests first, and founded on a theory of moral equivalence.”¹⁵ When Trump met Kim Jong-un about its nuclear program he not only offered major material concessions to the North Korean dictator, but also offered him a major symbolic victory: “A dictator who has ordered the murder of his own family members, and who oversees a gulag comparable to those of Hitler and Stalin, was able to parade on the global stage as a legitimate statesman.”¹⁶ There are many more examples. Of course, Trump was not the first American president to work with autocrats. What distinguishes his behavior, however, is his outward embrace and admiration of these leaders, the simultaneous hostility he showed toward longstanding democratic allies, and the lack of any overriding strategic interest in cultivating these illiberal relationships. Taken together, these actions suggested to the world that the United States was moving away from the norms and values that have long defined the international order.

Implications

The unusual style and tone of Trump’s approach to foreign policy has eroded America’s standing in the world. It has done so because it rendered American representations of its identity as illiberal and out of sync with the norms and values embodied in the international order, thus making the United States unrecognizable to its friends and closest allies. The United States’ status in the system depends on maintaining routinized relations of recognition with its allies. Thus, Trump’s erratic and hostile diplomacy destabilized these recognition routines and with it American status. This is not to suggest that the United States is no longer the leading power in the system, but rather that the stability of its leadership is tenuous.

It is no surprise, then, that a key priority of President Joe Biden’s early foreign policy has been to rehabilitate these relationships and restore America’s standing in the world. Biden quickly took steps to reestablish American membership in the international organizations from which Trump withdrew from and restart American engagement with allies and the international community more broadly. He has reasserted the United States’ commitment to democratic values at home and abroad and on the latter has taken tough stances with Russia, Turkey and China on these issues. Indeed, in many ways, his foreign policy is the discursive opposite of Trump’s. What this will mean for American status is yet to be determined. The fact that Trump’s presidency was even possible, and even more so that a strong authoritarian current presently runs through American domestic politics, casts doubt on the depth of the United States commitment to the values that underpin the liberal international order.

Michelle Murray is associate professor of Politics at Bard College. She is author of *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism and Rising Powers* (Oxford University Press, 2019), which argues that the struggle for recognition and status is an important determinant of the outcomes of power transitions.

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¹⁴ Don Peck, “Presidential Silence after an Attack on American Soil,” *The Atlantic* (January 13, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/01/trump-stands-by-while-erdogan-orders-attack-protesters/580093/>.

¹⁵ Mark Landler, “In Extraordinary Statement, Trump Stands with Saudis despite Khashoggi Killing,” *New York Times* (November 20, 2018), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/01/trump-stands-by-while-erdogan-orders-attack-protesters/580093/>.

¹⁶ Editorial Board, “Opinion: No More Concessions,” *The Washington Post* (June 12, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/the-singapore-summit-was-a-victory-for-kim-jong-un/2018/06/12/3731e970-6e44-11e8-bd50-b80389a4e569_story.html.