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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

When Donald Met Washington: The Genesis of ‘Great Power Competition’

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Washington’s foreign policy community had a love-hate relationship with President Donald Trump. They hated many of his foreign policy ideas so much that hundreds of Republican former officials and foreign policy experts signed open letters arguing that “he would use the authority of his office to act in ways that make America less safe, and which would diminish our standing in the world.”¹ Trump was indeed at odds with the D.C. establishment on many core foreign policy issues, from NATO funding to his proposed withdrawal from Afghanistan. Many pinned their hopes on the notion that principled appointees like former general James Mattis – the so-called “adults in the room” – could constrain Trump’s worst foreign policy impulses.² The 2020 Biden presidential campaign even explicitly cast its foreign policy in terms of ‘restoration,’ that is to say, of fixing the wrongs done by Donald Trump.

Yet perhaps the biggest foreign policy shift of Donald Trump’s four years in office was wholeheartedly embraced by Washington’s foreign policy community. First emerging in confirmation hearings, and then – more notably – as the core organizing principle of the 2017 *National Security Strategy*, “Great Power Competition” (GPC) has become the Washington buzzword of the decade.³ And while many foreign policy hands might distance themselves from the more extreme aspects of the Trump-era approach to GPC – his destructive trade wars against China, for example – there is a widespread acceptance of the idea that U.S. foreign policy should shift its focus from counterterrorism in order to confront a rising China and revanchist Russia. As President Joe Biden put it in his speech at the 2021 Munich Security Conference: “Competition with China is going to be stiff. That’s what I expect. And that’s what I welcome.”⁴

Trump’s tenure in office thus marked less of a break with the mainstream of U.S. foreign policy than one might have assumed. Instead, his bull-in-a-china-shop presidency acted more as a moment of punctuated equilibrium, allowing a trend that was already underway to emerge more rapidly. Certainly, it is unlikely that even under a generally more hawkish presidency of Hillary Clinton we would have seen such a rapid or forthright shift in U.S. relations towards China and Russia. The genesis of this ‘Great Power Competition’ – particularly its openly hostile framing – is thus one of the core legacies of the Trump presidency.

On the Roots of Great Power Competition

¹ “Open Letter on Trump from GOP National Security Leaders,” *War on the Rocks* (blog), March 3, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/open-letter-on-donald-trump-from-gop-national-security-leaders/>.

² Quinta Jurecic, “Did the ‘Adults in the Room’ Make Any Difference With Trump?,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/29/opinion/james-mattis-trump.html>.

³ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (December 2017), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

⁴ The White House, “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/>.

As with so many parts of the Trump presidency, GPC was in some ways more slogan than policy; poorly theorized, ill-defined, and implemented largely as a kind of reflexive hostility towards China. The assumptions underlying it were rarely stated, and even less often examined. On the one hand, competition apparently offered a description of how the world operated. As the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) rather ungrammatically put it, “after being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition returned.”⁵ On the other hand, competition was also the administration’s proposed strategy, with the NSS arguing that “protecting American interests requires that we compete continuously.”⁶ If nothing else, this internal inconsistency made it an easy target, particularly for scholars of international relations. As Georgetown University’s Dan Nexon recently wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, “competition among great powers cannot return, because it never really went away.”⁷

Yet despite these flaws, Washington’s foreign policy community wholeheartedly embraced the slogan. Since 2016, there has been a notable shift in the Washington consensus on China. That year, a bipartisan study group of foreign policy experts – many of them advisors to that year’s Clinton presidential campaign – could plausibly argue that “there is no reason for a fundamental adjustment in the approach the last eight administrations—Republican and Democratic—have taken to China. Promoting the peaceful rise of China...remains a sound strategy for the United States.”⁸ Indeed, throughout the 2000s, there was surprisingly little opposition to the proposition, that – as former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright put it in the 1990s – the United States should try to bring China “into the fold as a responsible participant in the international system, rather than driving it out into the wilderness of isolation.”⁹

In the brief span of the Trump presidency, however, such sentiments almost vanished. Instead, the language of Great Power Competition, with its open references to “ambitious, aggressive countries seeking regional dominance”¹⁰ and “revisionist authoritarian forces,”¹¹ quickly took hold. Op-eds, think tank reports, panel discussions, and congressional testimony all began to reframe China and Russia as threats rather than opportunities, and to suggest that the naïve hopes of the 1990s had not been borne out.¹² Structural or power variables can only take us so far in explaining this shift. After all, the trendlines of China’s rise, America’s relative decline, and the world’s gradual shift from unipolarity to multipolarity have been visible for a decade or more. Nor can we really explain it solely as a response to Chinese or Russian aggression. After all, Chinese island-building and Russia’s military interventions go back to the time of the Obama, and George W. Bush presidencies. Yet the Bush administration sought to minimize tensions with Beijing over, for example, Taiwan, while the Obama administration’s failed “pivot to Asia” was framed in substantially more benign terms than today’s GPC language. As National Security

⁵ *National Security Strategy*, 27.

⁶ *National Security Strategy*, 26.

⁷ Daniel H. Nexon, “Against Great Power Competition,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2021-02-15/against-great-power-competition>.

⁸ Kurt Campbell, Eric Edelman, Michèle Flournoy, Richard Fontaine, Stephen J. Hadley, Robert Kagan, James Rubin, Julianne Smith, James Steinberg, and Robert Zoellick, “Extending American Power: Strategies to Expand U.S. Engagement in a Competitive World Order,” Extending American Power Project (Center for a New American Security, May 2016), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/extending-american-power-strategies-to-expand-u-s-engagement-in-a-competitive-world-order>.

⁹ “Albright Interview on NBC-TV ‘The Today Show,’” U.S. Department of State Archive, February 19, 1998, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/1998/980219a.html>.

¹⁰ Michael Mandelbaum, “America in a New World,” *The American Interest*, May 23, 2016, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/05/23/america-in-a-new-world/>.

¹¹ Colin Dueck, *Age of Iron: On Conservative Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹² See, for example, Kathleen Hicks, Michael Mazarr, Oriana Skyler Mastro, Christopher Preble, and Kori Schake, “Great Power Competition,” Defense 2020, accessed May 6, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/great-power-competition>; Uri Friedman, “The New Concept Everyone in Washington Is Talking About,” *The Atlantic*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/08/what-genesis-great-power-competition/595405/>; Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery, “One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great-Power Competition,” *Texas National Security Review* 3:2 (Spring 2020): 80–92, <https://doi.org/10.26153/TSW/8865>; Bruce Jones, “China and the Return of Great Power Strategic Competition” (Brookings Institution, February 24, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/china-and-the-return-of-great-power-strategic-competition/>.

Advisor Tom Donilon put it in 2012, the pivot focused on respect for “international law and norms,” and on helping “emerging powers build trust with their neighbors.”¹³

In contrast, the Trump era – which featured the president’s open hostility to China – appears to have acted as a catalyst for a shift in Washington’s assumptions about Chinese intentions, with published articles increasingly suggesting either directly or obliquely that a dangerous new era of competition was being driven by growing Chinese and Russian revisionism.¹⁴ For example, the Trump administration’s National Defense Strategy states that “it is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.”¹⁵ It argues that Russia seeks to “shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and change European and Middle East security and economic structures to its favor,” while China seeks “Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.”¹⁶

Revisionism and Great Power Competition

From the point of view of academic study, however, this is a strange foundation upon which to build a grand strategy. All states are revisionist in some ways. Consider America’s post-Cold War behavior: the U.S. helped to remake the map of Europe during the 1990s, invaded Iraq as part of an attempt to increase the spread of democracy globally, and helped to overthrow dictators in Haiti, Libya, and elsewhere. Each of these actions sought to change the status quo; each was revisionist. This is particularly true for the simplistic, almost Manichean view of revisionism advanced by the Trump administration, which argued that China sought to “shape a world antithetical to US values and interests” and, ultimately, “to displace the United States.” As scholars have often noted, however, revisionism is rarely an all-or-nothing proposition. To be blunt: not all enemies are Nazis, but the mental scars of the second World War often lead us to see revisionism in the light of this most extreme of historical outliers. Or as Robert Jervis more pithily put it: “our memories of Hitler have tended to obscure the fact that most statesmen are unwilling to pay an exorbitant price for a chance at expansion.”¹⁷

In short, the question of Chinese intentions – and the impact of factors like domestic Chinese politics or the role of President Xi Jinping’s personality – is more open than the Great Power Competition framing would imply. As Michael Mazarr and Hal Brands argued in 2017, “the scope of Russian and Chinese ambitions, and the steps they are willing to take to achieve them—remain unknowable... There are powerful and growing reasons for concern, but there is also accumulated evidence that these two states view a stable international order as important to their interests.”¹⁸ It would certainly be surprising if a rising China did not harbor revisionist intentions; its actions in recent years make those intentions clear, from island-building to Chinese attempts to rewrite maritime norms. The scope of that revisionism, however, remains unknown. The same is true for Russia, which has shown strong revisionist inclinations towards neighboring Ukraine and Georgia – as well as towards some existing international norms – but whose broader territorial aims are unclear.

Yet the Trump administration’s stance on foreign policy for the most part reflected an absolutist vision of a world full of dangers and avowedly revisionist states. As former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster put it, “after the end of the Cold War, America and other free and open societies forgot that they had to compete to keep their freedom, security and prosperity;” these battles should be

¹³ Mark Manyin, Stephen Daggett, Ben Dolven, Susan V. Lawrence, and Ronald O’Rourke, “Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration’s ‘Rebalancing’ Toward Asia,” *CRS Report for Congress* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, March 28, 2012), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42448.pdf>.

¹⁴ See, for example, Mandelbaum, “America in a New World” and Aaron L. Friedberg, “An Answer to Aggression,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-08-11/ccp-answer-aggression>.

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy,” 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

¹⁶ “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy.”

¹⁷ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics: New Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹⁸ Mazarr and Hal Brands, “Navigating Great Power Rivalry in the 21st Century,” War on the Rocks (blog), April 5, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/navigating-great-power-rivalry-in-the-21st-century/>.

fought in overlapping “arenas of contestation.”¹⁹ This absolutist tendency has been embraced by many in Washington, where analysts often appear to confuse capabilities for intentions. Consider the recent imbroglio over Taiwan: though regional experts repeatedly argued that Beijing was probably attempting to coerce the island into political concessions through a series of provocative military maneuvers, many in Washington instead took this as evidence of an impending Chinese invasion.²⁰ In March, for example, Admiral Phil Davidson of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command told Congress that China might try to seize control of Taiwan within the next six years,²¹ a claim many analysts consider to be overblown.²²

The widespread acceptance of GPC as a core organizing principle of U.S. foreign policy thus conceals many of its Trumpian assumptions about revisionist great powers. It is certainly true that the Biden administration has been more circumspect about this aspect of great power competition; the administration’s interim strategic guidance document notes more blandly that “China, in particular, has rapidly become more assertive... Russia remains determined to enhance its global influence and play a disruptive role on the world stage.”²³ Yet, in speeches the president has referred to “extreme competition” with China.²⁴ And the notion continues to permeate much of the writing on GPC in Washington foreign policy circles. *The Economist* recently portrayed the China debate in Washington as one where “even dovish China watchers in America are becoming hawkish.”²⁵

The Risks of a Counter-Revisionist Grand Strategy

The nascent strategy of Great Power Competition – albeit a poorly operationalized and theorized one – is thus perhaps the most important legacy of the Trump administration for U.S. foreign policy. And it is a legacy that potentially sets American foreign policy on a more dangerous path in coming decades, not because it holds that states compete; that should be noncontroversial to any student of international affairs, but rather because state intentions are nuanced and hard to discern. Reducing the debate over U.S. foreign policy to a prescription for more competition with American adversaries is a recipe for potential conflict. Given its largely unthinking embrace of a more hostile posture towards China, Trump’s legacy is particularly toxic in this regard. Though there are the beginnings of a debate in Washington over what the goals of competition with China should be – from regime collapse to containment – it is notable (and disturbing) that this debate is happening five years *after* the Trump administration embraced a strategy of Great Power Competition.

The absolutism with which the Trump administration embraced GPC is primarily problematic in practical terms. For one thing, it has created a strong focus on capabilities over strategy, with simulated wargames that suggest that the U.S. military is not sufficiently well equipped or positioned to win a war with China.²⁶ Proposals for a 300-, 350-, or even 400-ship navy focus on quantitative metrics for a military buildup. And this focus on conflict also shuts off a variety of other plausible policy responses to China’s rise, leaving mostly maximalist options on the table. It suggests, for example, that rising powers cannot be reasoned with or managed diplomatically. It

¹⁹ H.R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (HarperCollins, 2020), 4.

²⁰ Louise Watt, “‘Perception Gap’: Taiwan Says U.S. Fears of Chinese Invasion Are Missing the Real Threat,” Yahoo News, accessed May 6, 2021, <https://news.yahoo.com/pressure-pineapple-wars-taiwan-fears-083000368.html>.

²¹ Mallory Shelborne, “Davidson: China Could Try to Take Control of Taiwan In ‘Next Six Years,’” USNI News, March 9, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/03/09/davidson-china-could-try-to-take-control-of-taiwan-in-next-six-years>.

²² Elliot Waldman, “Fears of an Imminent Chinese Invasion of Taiwan Are Overblown,” *World Politics Review*, January 1, 2021, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/29538/fears-of-an-imminent-china-taiwan-war-are-overblown>.

²³ The White House, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

²⁴ David Wertime, “‘Extreme Competition’ Is Now the Watchword in U.S.-China Relations,” *Politico*, February 11, 2021, <https://politi.co/3rN385w>.

²⁵ “Even Doveish China-Watchers in America Are Becoming Hawkish,” *The Economist*, May 1, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/china/2021/05/01/even-doveish-china-watchers-in-america-are-becoming-hawkish>.

²⁶ Barry Rosenberg, “US ‘Gets Its Ass Handed To It’ In Wargames: Here’s A \$24 Billion Fix,” *Breaking Defense* (blog), accessed May 6, 2021, <https://breakingdefense.com/2019/03/us-gets-its-ass-handed-to-it-in-wargames-heres-a-24-billion-fix/>.

implies that spheres of influence are little more than a form of appeasement, and that any attempt to find concessions or compromise that might address Chinese or Russian security concerns will fail.

Moreover, this GPC framing also suggests that the only way to prevent conflict is to deter revisionist states. As former Undersecretary of Defense Michèle Flournoy outlined, “the more confident China’s leaders are in their own capabilities and the more they doubt the capabilities and resolve of the United States, the greater the chance of miscalculation—a breakdown in deterrence that could bring direct conflict between two nuclear powers.”²⁷ Yet the security dilemma is also salient here: as history shows, a policy that is focused on deterrence is unfortunately also the approach most likely to heighten tensions and insecurity, leading to a spiral into conflict. Policymakers’ selective memories of the Cold War apparently obscure the fact that some of the most dangerous periods of the early Cold War were those in which shows of force led to crises. The more stable eras, in contrast, were those in which the superpowers maintained military readiness, but also engaged in a variety of reassurance and crisis-management measures.

Unfortunately, the Biden team appears set to continue with Donald Trump’s problematic strategy of Great Power Competition. As Secretary of State Tony Blinken articulated in his confirmation hearing, “we can outcompete China.”²⁸ Yet there are substantial risks to pursuing this competitive, confrontational approach, particularly one which is based on little more than assumptions about revisionism. To be sure, the opposite assumption is also problematic. It is not true that America has nothing to fear from China and Russia, or that the U.S. can be sure of their benign intentions. Yet Trump’s time in office instead pushed the debate so far in the other direction that it is increasing the risks of a new cold – or even hot war. Increased tensions, economic damage, and in the worst case, conflict; these are the costs of mindlessly pursuing GPC and getting it wrong. Ultimately, this means that Donald Trump’s foreign policy legacy may end up being as consequential – and more dangerous – than even his impact on domestic politics.

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²⁷ Michèle Flournoy, “How to Prevent a War in Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/United-States/2020-06-18/how-prevent-war-asia>.

²⁸ Antony Blinken, “Nominee for Secretary of State, Written Statement for the Record,” Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (2021), https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/011921_Blinken_Testimony.pdf.