

# H-Diplo | ISSF Policy Series

America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

## *The Trump Presidency in Historical Perspective*

Essay by John A. Thompson, University of Cambridge

Published on **20 July 2021** | [issforum.org](https://issforum.org)

Editors: Diane Labrosse and Joshua Rovner | Commissioning Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

---

<https://issforum.org/to/ps2021-47>

In my 2017 essay I did not venture any predictions about how Donald Trump would behave as president, or the extent to which he would wish (or be able) to re-shape the character of U.S. foreign policy according to his own views.<sup>1</sup> Rather, I focused on the evident public appeal of his call to put “America First,” seeking to explain this and to assess the impact it might have on the character of U.S. foreign policy. I observed that the extensive scope of America’s security commitments went far beyond those needed to safeguard the nation’s core interests of physical security and economic wellbeing and that they were therefore intrinsically vulnerable to domestic criticism, especially whenever they became costly to uphold. The commitments were the product of a broader conception of America’s vital interests as including also the existence of a stable world order in which its values as well as its interests would be respected. That the scale of America’s power brought with it a special responsibility for the maintenance of such a world order had become the orthodoxy governing U.S. foreign policy as a result of the two world wars and it had been solidified during the Cold War. The end of the Cold War had led to a questioning of the justification for these wide-ranging military commitments – by realist advocates of ‘restraint’ as well as by Trump – and, more recently, the lengthy and unsuccessful interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq had created public and political resistance to involvement in further ‘foreign wars.’<sup>2</sup> This was the background of the apparent political appeal of Trump’s “America First” rhetoric, which was likely to raise doubts abroad about the credibility of U.S. commitments, and thus weaken the country’s capacity to uphold its version of world order.

My lack of attention to Trump himself in that essay was partly due to a belief that the general shape of U.S. foreign policy is determined by broader forces than the particular character and outlook of individual presidents. More fundamental in my view are movements of public and political opinion that are themselves often responses to overseas events and the way these are interpreted. Historically, the major changes in U.S. policy have occurred during the course of a presidency rather than when a new occupant enters the White House. Examples include the presidencies of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush. Most of these cases involved a shift toward the wider and more vigorous deployment of U.S. power. By contrast, following the end of a costly conflict (whether successful or otherwise) U.S. policy has generally reflected public reluctance to become involved in another one.

From this history, we can gain some understanding of what has in practice shaped the United States’ use of the great potential power it has possessed since the early twentieth century – what might be called the operational definition of the national interest. The picture is complicated by the fact that many of the cases involving the more forceful exercise of U.S. power have been precipitated by a direct attack upon Americans – and it is this that has really aroused the nation’s fighting spirit. But these attacks, including Pearl Harbor and 9/11, have themselves been responses to earlier U.S. actions. These actions, like many others, demonstrated that U.S. policy has been shaped by interests that go well beyond the nation’s own safety and prosperity. As anti-interventionists over the years have argued, safeguarding the

---

<sup>1</sup> John A. Thompson “The Appeal of ‘America First,’” H-Diplo/ISSF, 23 February 2017, <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5Q.pdf>; Thompson, “The Appeal of ‘America First,’” 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):151-157.

<sup>2</sup> For advocacy of “restraint,” see for example Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press and Harvey M. Sapolsky, “Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security* 21:4 (Spring 1997): 5-48; Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014) and Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018): 260-278.

country's basic physical and economic security has required little in the way of foreign policy objectives and cannot explain the extent to which U.S. power has been deployed to shape developments across the world.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the broad goal of a liberal international order has not been sufficient in itself to motivate strenuous and costly actions. Polls have consistently shown that the majority of the public generally attaches a low priority to the promotion of democracy or human rights in other countries unless doing so would bring some specific benefit to the United States, and during the Cold War the United States effectively tolerated a Soviet sphere that was hostile to liberalism in principle as well as in practice.<sup>4</sup>

This might suggest that America's interests have been geographically circumscribed, but the historical record belies this too. Since the end of World War II, the United States has not been called upon to defend the western hemisphere or its allies in western Europe and east Asia (or indeed Israel). Its major wars have been fought in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, which are not countries of obvious strategic significance or with which the United States had close cultural connections or (at the time) ideological bonds. If there is a consistent interest that explains both the extent and the limits of the exercise of U.S. power since 1945 it would seem to be that of maintaining America's pre-eminent position in world politics.<sup>5</sup> That there is domestic political support for this objective, independent of any particular instrumental purpose, was shown after the end of the Cold War. In the 1990s, when the United States enjoyed good relations with every major power, its military spending exceeded that of the next twenty or thirty countries combined and by the end of the decade the Pentagon's benchmark for the necessary forces was that they should have the capacity to wage two "major regional conflicts" simultaneously. By the time Trump became president, the United States had formal defense commitments to 66 other countries and informal security arrangements with several more, all of which was underpinned by approximately eight hundred military bases of various sizes across the globe.<sup>6</sup>

The determination to maintain America's pre-eminent global position seems to have been what fueled the significant movement of opinion that occurred during Trump's presidency – the emergence of a bipartisan political consensus that China should be regarded as a rival and adversary rather than a potential partner. Although Trump entered the White House as a long-time advocate of the use of tariffs to eliminate the U.S. trade deficit with China, and began imposing such tariffs in early 2018, he was not primarily responsible for the adoption of a generally more confrontational policy; indeed, he had initially sought to achieve a trade deal by cultivating a personal relationship with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The Pentagon had long been pressing for a tougher response to Chinese expansion in the South China Sea but had met resistance from those who hoped to maintain a cooperative relationship. The emergence of a consensus in Washington that a harder line was called for was a gradual process that owed much to perceptions of Beijing's behavior and ambitions. Trump was quick to adapt to this new reality and to seek political advantage by exploiting it – notably by blaming China for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Presidents, as the only elected officials directly involved in the process, are inevitably sensitive to domestic opinion when making foreign policy. In this respect as in others, Trump was an extreme case, seeming to be almost exclusively concerned with the appeal of his actions at home rather than their effects abroad. For the most part, however, the opinion that weighed most with him reflected his signature political strategy of firing up his base rather than seeking to broaden his support. On many issues, such as withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement and the Iran nuclear deal or recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, this led Trump to act as another president would not have done. It is already clear that the Biden administration will change the direction of U.S. policy on such issues, even if it is not able or willing to reverse all of Trump's actions. But it is also already clear that on China policy there will be substantial continuity.

---

<sup>3</sup> For examples of such anti-interventionist arguments over the years, see Charles A. Beard, *Giddy Minds and Foreign Quarrels: An Estimate of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), and Robert W. Tucker, *A New Isolationism: Threat or Promise?* (New York: Universe Books, 1972), especially chapter III, and the works cited in footnote 2.

<sup>4</sup> See Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *Foreign Policy in the Age of Retrenchment* (2014). Also, Randall L. Schweller's contribution to this series, "Trump's Realism," *H-Diplo International Security Studies Forum*, April 29, 2021, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/ps2021-26>.

<sup>5</sup> That global dominance became a basic objective of U.S. policymakers during World War II is the central argument of Stephen Wertheim in *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020) – though it is perhaps better described as an insight than as a research finding.

<sup>6</sup> Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 24, 38-9, 62; and Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States* (London: Penguin, 2019): 344, 472.

Given the common tendency to discuss current issues in terms of historical precedent, it is not surprising that the emerging Sino-American contest is frequently compared to the Cold War that was the principal focus of U.S. policy for more than four decades. As many observers have pointed out, there are important differences. In the first place, there is a greater degree of mutual interest between the antagonists or competitors. The only really important interest that the United States shared with the Soviet Union was that of avoiding a nuclear war – which did indeed serve to mitigate the conflict and lead to limited agreements. Avoidance of nuclear war remains a common interest between the United States and China but there are now other important ones, notably countering climate change and global pandemics.

Beyond this, whereas the economic connections between the United States and the Soviet bloc were of slight importance to either side, the Chinese and American economies have become mutually dependent in recent decades, notwithstanding the efforts both governments are now making to reduce the extent to which this is so. Finally, the Cold War was essentially a conflict of ideologies; indeed, to some in the west international Communism was the chief enemy, with Soviet power only an instrument of this. Although Beijing imposes its own authoritarian rule in the areas it controls, and also portrays China's successes as proof of the superiority of its system to western democracy, it seems to have little interest in bringing about ideological change in other countries. Instead, it proclaims its goal as being to displace the United States as the leading power in the world and thereby achieve paramount influence over the nature of the world system and in international affairs generally.

This ambition points to a fundamental difference between the present situation and the Cold War: the changed balance of world power. The most acute phase of the Cold War took place in the decades when U.S. power was at its apogee. At the end of World War II, the United States was producing a third of total global output, and through the 1950s and 1960s its GDP was two and a half to three times greater than that of the Soviet Union. Now, the U.S. share of global GDP has fallen to 24 per cent, whereas China's is already 18 per cent and is projected to exceed America's (on every criterion of measurement) during the 2020s.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the reliability of such extrapolated trends, or of simple equations between the relative size of a country's GDP and its influence in world politics, such facts have helped generate a confidence in Beijing that history is going its way and that China is a rising power and the United States a declining one. How far did the Trump administration provide evidence of such a decline in U.S. power, and how far did it contribute to it?

Trump was by no means indifferent to the extent of U.S. influence in world affairs. Although uninterested in sustaining a liberal world order, an implicit part of his project to "make America great again" was that the United States should prevail in the Darwinian struggle between states that he seems to have seen as the essence of international relations. Like earlier proponents of "America First," he was not an isolationist but a unilateralist.<sup>8</sup> This did involve some narrowing of the objectives he sought to achieve. Uniquely among post-1945 U.S. presidents, Trump's conception of the national interest did not include the promotion of freedom and democracy in other countries. But he had confidence in the scale of America's hard power in all its several forms – military, economic and financial – and was happy to wield it. It is true that he sought to unload on other members of NATO a greater share of the costs and that he often spoke of his desire to bring U.S. troops home from foreign trouble-spots but he promoted the further build-up of America's military might (including in space) and had no inhibitions about using it, as he demonstrated early on in his presidency when he authorized the dropping of a monster 20,000 pound bomb in Afghanistan and again in January 2020 with the assassination of Iran's top military commander General Qassem Suleimani. Through the aggressive use of discriminatory tariffs he sought to use the "imperial" scale of America's domestic market as a diplomatic weapon over a broader spectrum of issues than any of his predecessors.<sup>9</sup> Trump's administration also exploited the central role of U.S. banks in the international payments system in order to compel foreign companies to comply with unilaterally imposed sanctions on Iran and Venezuela and blacklisted more individual foreigners than George W. Bush and Barack Obama had done in sixteen years.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> *The Economist*, June 5-11, 2021, 13; and David Reynolds, *America: Empire of Liberty: A New History of the United States*, revised and updated edition (New York: Basic Books, 2021): 520.

<sup>8</sup> Manfred Jonas, *Isolationism in America 1935-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), especially chapter 1.

<sup>9</sup> On the United States' "empire of consumption," see Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> For the Office of Foreign Assets Control's statistics on this, see *The Economist*, November 28, 2020, 46-47.

As other contributors to this forum have observed, Trump's unilateral use of American hard power was almost completely unsuccessful in achieving its proclaimed objectives.<sup>11</sup> The harsh economic sanctions imposed on Iran and Venezuela caused considerable economic hardship in those countries but did not produce the desired regime change any more than those on Russia caused President Vladimir Putin to become more amenable to Washington's demands. The same lack of tangible success marked Trump's well-publicized personal diplomacy with North Korea's Kim Jong-un, Xi, and Putin. Worse than failure to achieve new goals was the damage Trump did to intangibles that were fundamental to the influence in the world that the United States possessed when he took office – its trustworthiness, its willingness to cooperate with allies, and its image with people in other countries. The credibility of U.S. commitments was brought into question by some of the things Trump said about NATO and further damaged by the cynical abandonment of Kurdish allies in Syria in 2019. The abrupt withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) early in the administration scuppered a project that was designed to provide a counterweight to China in east Asia.<sup>12</sup> Trump was unpopular outside the United States, receiving far lower poll ratings in almost every country (particularly European ones) than any of his predecessors – in stark contrast to Obama. One indication that this led to a more negative view of America generally and thus a decline in the country's "soft power" is the steady decline during the years of Trump's presidency in the number of students from overseas enrolled in U.S. universities.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear that the Biden administration is seeking to undo the damage that Trump has done to America's international image and influence by reversing or modifying many of the policies that have caused most offence abroad, by rebuilding relationships with old allies in Europe, and by strengthening ties in the Asia-Pacific both with long-standing partners and with projected new ones such as India. The relief with which Trump's departure from the White House was greeted in many foreign capitals will aid these efforts, and so the direct consequences of his four-year presidency are likely to be mostly transient. Of greater importance for the future of U.S. foreign policy will be broader and more long-term developments, some of which contributed to Trump's political rise and provided support for his policies. One is the reaction against globalization. From the 1980s to 2009 world trade grew twice as fast as world output, but since then the ratio has slightly declined, and trade has concentrated more in regional blocs.<sup>14</sup> COVID-19 has accentuated business as well as political concern about the insecurity of extended supply chains, and the Biden administration has indicated that it will be in no hurry to lift the trade restrictions Trump imposed, keeping in place as well the "buy American" policy in major public tenders. Also apparent before Trump assumed office was a decline or retreat in Washington from the hubristic confidence in America's 'unipolar' material and ideological power that prevailed in the 1990s and particularly in the early years of the George W. Bush presidency.<sup>15</sup> A desire to become less involved in the politics of the Middle East has been perhaps the most obvious sign of this, and although existing commitments (and military bases) exercise an inertial counterforce, this desire seems likely to continue and strengthen.<sup>16</sup> And then, of course, there is the overriding concern that has arisen about the challenge that China is presenting to the international position and influence of the United States.

In the past, perceptions of a serious external challenge have been uniquely efficacious in creating the solid domestic support required for a focused and disciplined policy that involves a readiness to exercise U.S. power in strenuous or costly ways. A belief that the country's values as well as its interests are at stake has also been an essential element in building the necessary consensus for such a policy. Although few have seen the promotion of democracy or human rights abroad as justifying the expenditure of significant resources, defending them where they are already established is a different matter. That "the world must be made safe for democracy" is the most quoted sentence in Woodrow Wilson's 1917 war address but it is commonly misread. It was a call not for the world to be made democratic but for a form of

---

<sup>11</sup> See in particular Thomas W. Zeiler, "What Nationalism Ended up Looking Like," *H-Diplo International Security Studies Forum*, March 11, 2021, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/ps2021-12>.

<sup>12</sup> Subsequent developments are lucidly analyzed in Dayna Barnes's contribution to this series, "Engage?: Trump and the Asia-Pacific," *H-Diplo International Security Studies Forum*, May 11, 2021, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/ps2021-29>.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Redden, "International Student Numbers Decline," *Inside Higher Education*, November 16, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> "Special Report: The World Economy," *The Economist*, October 10, 2020, 6-8.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70:1 (1990): 23-33; and William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24:1 (Summer 1999): 5-41. The hubris was particularly manifested by the Project for a New American Century. See Robert Kagan and William Kristol, *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> On the inertial counterforce, see F. Gregory Gause III, "The Trump Administration and the Middle East: Not Much Change, Not Much Success," *H-Diplo International Security Studies Forum*, May 4, 2021; <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/ps2021-27>.

international order in which America could continue to live as a free society; the thrust was defensive rather than evangelical.<sup>17</sup> Policymakers have another incentive to stress the ideological dimension of the contest with China in the greater need for foreign allies or partners now that the United States does not enjoy the clear superiority in material power over its rival that it had in the Cold War. Other countries are more likely to rally to the defense of democracy and human rights than to the cause of maintaining America's primacy in international politics.

Yet there are still reasons to doubt whether the China challenge will serve as well to focus and energize U.S. foreign policy as did the original Cold War or even the "war on terror." In those cases, and other earlier ones, policymakers succeeded in persuading ordinary Americans that there was a real threat to their own safety and way of life in the homeland.<sup>18</sup> It is hard to see a challenge to the rather abstract concept of world leadership, or such specific issues as the Belt and Road Initiative or expansion in the South China Sea, as engendering a similarly strong sense of existential danger. And then there is the problem of America's own internal division, which to this outside observer seems deeper and more bitter than any since the Civil War. In more monarchical or autocratic polities this would incentivize rulers "to busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels" but it is hard to see America's divided political class adopting such a strategy – all the more so because Trump's presidency served to "giddy" Americans' minds all the more with their domestic quarrels.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, it may well be that Donald Trump's greatest influence on the future of U.S. foreign policy will be the part he played, and is continuing to play, in exacerbating the toxic social and political civil war that did so much to elevate him to the presidency.

**John A. Thompson** is an Emeritus Reader in American History and an Emeritus Fellow of St Catharine's College at the University of Cambridge. His principal research interests have been American liberalism and U.S. foreign policy. His publications include *Progressivism* (British Association for American Studies, 1979), *Reformers and War: American Progressive Publicists and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), *Woodrow Wilson* (Longman, 2002), *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America's Global Role* (Cornell University Press, 2015) and numerous articles and book chapters.

© Copyright 2021 The Authors | 

---

<sup>17</sup> For a fuller analysis of Wilson's views on democracy promotion, see John A. Thompson, "Woodrow Wilson" in Michael Cox, Timothy J. Lynch and Nicolas Bouchet, eds., *US Foreign Policy and Democracy Promotion* (London: Routledge, 2013): 53-68.

<sup>18</sup> On this history, see John A. Thompson, "The Exaggeration of American Vulnerability: The Anatomy of a Tradition," *Diplomatic History* 16 (Winter 1992): 23-43.

<sup>19</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry IV. Part II*, Act 4, scene 3.