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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

The Trump “Legacy” for American Foreign Policy

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We cannot calculate President Trump’s “legacy” for United States foreign policy simply by describing his diplomacy while he was in power. Virtuous fathers can fritter away family wealth, and Mafiosi can leave ill-gotten gains to charity. It is still too early to know what long-term consequences might emerge, and it is difficult to sort out what trends would have prevailed even with a less disruptive leader. Happily, a one-term presidency is less likely to leave durable wreckage in terms of our international reputation than eight years would have done. My own admittedly non-impartial view is that Trump’s domestic legacy was more damaging and dangerous than his international one. With his wanton disregard for truth, his use of social media to spread vituperation and contempt, whether for opponents or supporters who fell out of favor, his winking at practitioners of political violence, he simply trashed the norms needed for a functioning democracy – and that is not to mention the continual challenges to the 2020 election results. Still, H-Diplo has asked about the consequences for foreign policy, and those remain the focus here.

The impulsiveness of Trump’s foreign policy, exemplified by the withdrawal from the Paris climate accord and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) Iranian nuclear framework along with the coarsening of rhetoric – yes, words matter – has damaged America’s stature as a reliable partner (or adversary) in foreign affairs. By the end of the first term an impartial observer might plausibly have believed that the United States was a danger to global peace, not because the country intended a war – George W. Bush was far clearer about that goal in 2003 – but because its leader was brutally transactional, and like every American president possessed extraordinary constitutional power over foreign policy and military decisions. To my mind, as a historian of Europe, American behavior sometimes recalled the Germany of Kaiser William II – a country, like the United States, that was given to revering its military forces and saddled with a mercurial ruler, unpredictable and heedless of the lamentable impression it was making abroad. Fortunately, the American defense and state department bureaucracies were inertial or intelligent enough to resist some, though not all, of the White House whims. And even the president managed to resist the potential for untethered policy making from advisers such as Michael Flynn or John Bolton.

Fortunately, much of the behavior that dismayed those who prize a collaborative relationship with allies and friends involved style more than substance, so can probably be repaired. Nevertheless, as the Trump presidency fades into history – assuming that he will not successfully run again in 2024 or that his approach to U.S. international behavior will not be reproduced under a Republican successor – it is also evident that the considerable challenges now facing the Biden administration are not simply legacies from the Trump administration. They are agonizing issues that transcend the question of which president is in power. President Barack Obama could not resolve them, and it is hardly clear that President Biden can either. To be sure, Trump denied their gravity and believed he could overcome them on the basis of vague threats or of personal bonding with one or another dictator. Still, the issues involved would have vexed, and will vex even the wisest leadership. And to judge from initiatives taken so far, the Biden administration has not figured out, or believed it appropriate to stake out positions, that are fundamentally different.

This essay was largely written before President Biden’s decision to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan, but a final version must take account of that defeat. One can argue that the Trump administration’s signing of a peace accord with the Taliban in 2020 foreclosed Biden’s options. But enough maneuverability remained in terms of timing and residual force levels to leave the current president some freedom of action. Biden, however, like Obama – with respect to Syria -- and perhaps like Trump, saw the alternative as a ‘forever war’ that could yield no decision. I appreciate the reasoning that led to this disengagement, but fear that a generation of aspiring Afghan women and those citizens who wagered on presidential assurances will pay a heavy price for U.S. abandonment. President Biden has claimed that the country will no longer be an al-Qaeda haven (just as President Trump declared that the danger of ISIS had ended), but that proclaimed goal has long been less compelling now that terrorist networks subsist in many different territories. Indeed, the alleged removal of a terrorist threat from a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan may prove a spurious achievement given the recent actions of the so-

called ISIS-K network. The greater consideration was perhaps that both the Trump and Biden administrations decided that if the Afghans could not finally defend themselves, they did not deserve to be forever defended by the United States. This is a justification, however, that ignores the role of the allies of United States, and the sacrifices Afghans themselves have made. Defenders of the sudden withdrawal have also stressed that the United States was unlikely to turn the country into a functioning democracy. But acknowledging this limitation did not have to mean that the U.S. could not have helped to preserve a non-authoritarian and more tolerant regime at an acceptable cost.

That admittedly less exalted mission has now been foreclosed, and the decision is in line with Trump's policies even if Biden faced up to more honestly. For better or worse, American policy in the Middle East and Central Asia has long been a messy bipartisan one. It has occasionally been mendacious and disastrous such as in the case of the 2003-04 war in Iraq, which was also supported on both sides of the aisle. More often it has been one of temporizing, what the British called cunctation – kicking the can down the road, which works until it doesn't. This approach has characterized the U.S. approach to the Saudi regime, and it has characterized the government's unwillingness to pry Israel from its policies that are determined to forestall any viable Palestinian national structure.

Cunctation may be the only realistic policy with respect to the other issues Biden must face. In the long run the United States is unlikely to overcome the assertiveness of China in geopolitical and economic terms, the resistance of both China and the Soviet Union to human rights, and the global turn to authoritarianism more widely. With respect to international economic and social issues, the major Western nations will all confront throngs of migrants fleeing collapsing or abusive state authority in Central America and the Middle East (the latter of which are more of a European concern); they have already had a hard time facing the global health issues raised by the COVID-19 pandemic; and all them are struggling to institute the collective action needed to mitigate the massive impact of climate change. The harsh truth is that every president inherits a heavily encumbered international situation and must judge what to accept and what to contest. Biden has accepted Germany's plan to move ahead with the Nord Stream 2 pipeline from Russia as a "*fait-accompli*," even though it threatens to further squeeze Ukraine, and will not reduce German dependence on hydrocarbons¹ Despite ritual denials, NATO partners in general have apparently accepted the Russian annexation of Crimea as a *fait-accompli*. Swallowing the *fait-accompli* may become the *leitmotif* of U.S. decline even though acceptable political rhetoric will never allow it to be confessed openly.

President Trump did nothing to reverse this melancholy prospect. His massive over-confidence in his mastery of the art of the deal and his personal presence led him to believe that Kim Jong-un would succumb to his blandishments and renounce North Korea's nuclear program. He was foolish to think so and to have disregarded the unsettling impact it would have on the delicate triangle with South Korea and Japan. Still, if it had been adequately prepared, I would not condemn the wager on a personal meeting as such. The underlying problem is that Trump seemed to have little capacity to understand the 'structural' limits to personal cajolery. So long as Kim Jong-un remains willing to disregard the economic costs to his population, his nuclear arsenal provides him with a power and status he has no reason to renounce. The Chinese could change his calculus, but why should they bring Pyongyang to heel so long as it remains an irritant to the United States, South Korea, and Japan? Beijing has no motive to make life easy for Washington.

The dilemma posed by the Iranian nuclear program is somewhat different since Tehran has not yet achieved a nuclear stockpile. The question was (and remains) whether the JPCOA was really likely to forestall that eventuality in the long run. The Biden administration has not rushed to rejoin it unconditionally. Detractors of the agreement believe that its 15-year limit is dangerously brief. Supporters are wagering that somehow Iran's rulers will find it in their interest to extend it. In both cases the wager is on the long-term nature of the Iranian regime. Is it realistic for the United States to seek long-term cooperation from Iranian moderates? Or should it accept their weakness in the current institutional structure and simply confront the hard-liners with ever-harsher sanctions (assuming that the U.S. and its Israeli allies forswear the option of a preemptive strike with all the incalculable consequences that would entail)? Obviously, the division between hard-liners and moderates is far too crude and allows for no evolution of positions. (The historian does well to recall the dilemmas posed by the Versailles treaty framework and its impact on German political institutions between 1919 and 1939. Would earlier revision have forestalled the advent of Nazi leader Adolf Hitler? Should it have been enforced integrally early on once he came to power? These issues are still debated.)

There is another alternative: simply accept that after fifteen years the Iranians may well acquire nuclear weapons, and that thereafter the Islamic Republic's potential adversaries will have to rely on the balance of terror to keep them from being used. This is, after all, the

¹ John Hudson, "Amid internal disputes over Russia policy, Biden has chosen a mix of confrontation and cooperation," *The Washington Post*, 15 June 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-putin-summit/2021/06/15/19657e2c-cd44-11eb-9b7e-e06f6cfdece8_story.html

regime that India and Pakistan, China, Russia, France, Britain and the U.S. have relied on since 1945. Before insisting that it remains unacceptable in the case of Iran or North Korea we have to ask what feasible and acceptable alternative promises greater stability.

In any case, the non-proliferation regime that has been in theory a bipartisan commitment of U.S. foreign policy is always going to be vulnerable short of global nuclear disarmament. It establishes a hierarchy of great powers that second-rank authoritarian powers will be tempted to challenge. In practice it is a regime of slowed proliferation, in which one or two new nuclear powers have been allowed to emerge every couple of decades. The major deterrent to acquisition aside from cost has been the quite rational conclusion that to possess atomic weapons is likely to make one a target for other nuclear powers. Trump apparently asked his advisers why, if the United States has nuclear weapons, it doesn't use them. The question suggested that the rationality needed for a deterrence regime may not be foolproof. The Soviets and Americans have preserved a mutual deterrence regime for some 70 years, but it can only be judged successful if it lasts forever. Israel may ultimately have to live with such a Damoclean status quo. The debate that Trump's legacy should reopen is whether the U.S. should strive for universal nuclear disarmament including its own arsenal if it would keep countries such as Iran from acquiring atomic weapons. A hierarchical system of limited access to weaponry is unlikely to provide stability forever.

Trump's decision to withdraw from the JPCOA had, of course, wider implications in terms of regional Middle Eastern politics. It further cemented an alignment with former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Israeli policies, a clear choice to write off any remaining tattered hopes for a two-state solution and to humiliate the Palestinians. Trump's turning over a highly complex set of questions to his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, was not unprecedented (Italian dictator Benito Mussolini also relied on his son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano as foreign minister... before he had him shot for supporting his ouster), but it revealed again how all complex issues were filtered through personal relationships.

Nonetheless, an implicit strategy was emerging for the Middle East from Kushner's bricolage. The administration in effect was brokering an alignment of authoritarian Gulf rulers, the Saudis, and Netanyahu to tamp down the troublesome (and yes, sometimes terrorist) subaltern peoples of the region – whether Palestinians or the non-Arab proletariats of the Gulf. Having an authoritarian regime in Egypt preoccupied with its own repressive agenda, a hapless Iraqi state, and an epic tragedy in Syria helped facilitate this *combinazione*. Probably any international agreements involving Israel and the other Middle Eastern powers should be welcomed, but the so-called Abraham Accords were clearly a coalition of conservative elites against radical change, a latter-day Holy Alliance sanctimoniously named for the spiritual ancestor of the three monotheistic faiths. None of its signatories apparently recalled how Hagar fit into that story as well.

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When it comes to foreign policy it seems to me that several fundamental choices currently face the United State, and they are often obfuscated by worn-out slogans. Does it wish to retain its “global leadership”? Is it in fact an “indispensable nation”? Does it make sense for political leaders to insist that its “greatest days lie ahead”? I am not sure what global leadership consists of these days. If it involves military preponderance, the U.S. may still retain it, but an edge in hardware probably means less than it once did. If North Korea managed to land nuclear missiles on any American city the result would be disastrous, no matter what vengeance the United States might choose to exact. If Russian-protected cyber outlaws brought down urban transportation and medical systems, the consequences would be catastrophic. It has been evident for over half a century that the United States could not maintain its post-World War II share of global production and wealth, and the real success of foreign economic policy would be a more universal economic development. If moral “leadership” is at stake – which is where Trump failed most egregiously—then the United States has serious tasks ahead: absorbing migrants, closing Guantánamo, and reforming its incarceration system (more the product of the Clinton years than Trump's administration – indeed one area where Trump promised some meaningful reform), and reversing glaring inequalities of race, income, and wealth. Rather than insisting on global leadership, the task of the U.S. should be to manage America's relative decline in a multipolar system without military conflict. Measure success by raising the health, education, and welfare levels of the world's poorest, including America's own.

And what about the constitutional provisions for setting American foreign policy? After the Vietnam War Congress moved to reclaim more power over American military interventions abroad – a tendency that was reversed again after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Normally vigorous Congressional oversight should seem desirable. But let us be candid, Congress supported the cold-war engagement that liberals called for during a period when Democrats still ruled a one-party South and segregationist senators chaired key committees concerned with foreign policy and defense. Do supporters of a strong presidential role really want Congressional oversight when Trump's legacy still seems so strong over a Southern white electorate?

On the other hand, whether speaking as historian or citizen, I am not ready to endorse the calls for a withdrawal from international commitments to the degree that has now become fashionable among some in both conservative and progressive circles. Andrew Bacevich

and Stephen Wertheim have exposed some of the grandiose visions that have motivated American imperial pretensions since the outset of World War II, but perhaps because of my age (a child of the Marshall Plan, so to speak), I think that the military and diplomatic retrenchment they recommend would be unwise in today's world.² Aside from the global upheavals that might follow, I do not believe that American politics would witness a succession of uncontested catastrophic outcomes, whether in the Middle East, or Taiwan, or elsewhere without descending into a series of domestic witch hunts or ultimately giving way to a sudden reversal of security policy from an objectively disadvantaged position (cf. Britain in 1938-40).

I believe it is appropriate to defend values as well as interests, although to what degree military force should be engaged has to be weighed case by case. There is a case for speaking loudly as well as wielding a big stick. Speaking truth to power is a more appealing way of putting it. I would submit it is the best choice for dealing with China even while the United States reengages with regional Asian and European allies. Human rights cannot be the only guideline for policy but neither can acceptance of the *fait accompli*. Public opinion loves to find a suitable "doctrine" for foreign policy – the Monroe Doctrine, the Truman Doctrine, the Nixon Doctrine, etc. – but case-by-case wisdom is probably more useful and will certainly be more necessary. Ironically, the Trump presidency may have done one indirect public service through all its brutal disruptions if it compels a rethinking of what foreign policy the American imperial republic can and should defend.

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² See among his other works, Andrew Bacevich, *After the Apocalypse: America's Role in a World Transformed* (New York: Macmillan, 2021); *The Age of Illusions* (New York: Henry Holt, 2020); *The Long Wars: A New History of U.S. National Security Policy since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); and Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow the World: the Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).