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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

The Trump Experiment Revisited

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Four years ago, I wrote that the Trump presidency would provide a test for many IR theories.¹ It was clear from Trump's campaign and his personal style that both his policy preferences and his methods of operation were outside of the political mainstream, and indeed this was a major part of his appeal to voters, even if they did not necessarily approve or even know of the specific policies he was advocating. What made this period so valuable to IR scholars, even if they disapproved of Trump, was that it would provide insight into the classic arguments about how much freedom of action an American president has and how much he was constrained by domestic interests, politics, and the international system. On this topic I found Kenneth Waltz's well known levels of analysis framework particularly useful.² The classic statement of the president's power in the realm of foreign affairs is Aaron Wildavsky's "The Two Presidencies."³

Here I want to discuss the results of the experiment and then turn briefly to what this means for the Biden presidency. Even in science, where scientists can clean their test tubes, the results of experiments often are unclear and susceptible to multiple interpretations. So in this case we should not be surprised that we—or at least I—see a muddy picture. One complication is that the experiment was not run under ideal conditions. Trump not only had unusual views, but was inexperienced in running a large and complex organization and had a short attention span for most issues. Richard Neustadt famously reported that President Harry Truman thought that his successor would not be able to manage the executive branch: "He'll sit here, and he'll say, 'Do this! Do that!' *And nothing will happen.*"⁴ Truman underestimated Eisenhower, but his prediction applies years later to Trump, in part because many of the people he appointed to high positions did not share his views.

This was most obviously the case with two of his national security advisors, H. R. McMaster and John Bolton, but was also true for Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and, to a lesser but still significant extent, his successor, Michael Pompeo. The old adage that personnel equals policy has a great deal to do with it. The puzzle here, of course, is why Trump paid so little attention to the policy views of those he was appointing. Whatever the reason, the very idiosyncrasies that meant that Trump would test our theories hindered his ability to act effectively. Although he had many unconventional ideas, he seems to have held them with varying intensity, and so I would expect the Trump effect to be greatest in areas that he cared most about, appointed subordinates who shared his views and values, and were implemented by agencies staffed by people with a supportive outlook.

On balance, I think the picture is mixed. Unlike the case with some presidential transitions, the inauguration of Donald Trump brought some obvious, important, and dramatic changes to American policy. It would be hard to argue that Democratic Party nominee Hillary Clinton's administration would have behaved in the same way. On the other hand, some realities proved obdurate.

¹ Robert Jervis, "President Trump and International Relations Theory," in Jervis, Francis Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse, eds., *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the 21st Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 3-7.

² Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954).

³ Aaron Wildavsky, "The Two Presidencies," *Society* 35 (January/February 1998), 23-31.

⁴ Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership* (New York: Wiley, 1960), 9; emphasis in the original

Central to Trump's agenda was the notion of "America First." (When he initially used this slogan, many observers, myself included, thought he would soon drop it because of its association with pre-World War II isolationism and, to a lesser but still significant extent, anti-Semitism.) It represented the belief that for years the U.S. had been taken advantage of, not only by adversaries, but by allies who had been free riders on American efforts to help them and to provide public goods. For Trump, the glaring example was trade, with the argument that American negotiators had been played for suckers and that this explained the loss of jobs, especially in the manufacturing sector, that had led to so much misery in the country. Here Trump not only cared deeply, but appointed people such as White House advisor Peter Navarro and Special Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer who shared his outlook, which partly explains why they were among the minority of his appointees who served for all four years. As a result, his administration really did follow very different policies from those of his predecessors. He applied tariffs to imports from allies, using the rationale of national security, which had never been done before and which most observers felt was unjustified and destructive, and he also applied extensive tariffs to imports from China, with significant costs imposed on consumers (despite Trump's claims to the contrary).

At least as important a part of the America First agenda were the restrictions applied to migration, especially from Mexico and Central America as well as from predominantly Muslim countries. In parallel he cut way back on admitting refugees and granting green cards, policy changes that received less attention from the media. Here too success was facilitated by his appointment of subordinates who shared his values.

These two areas I think count against the argument that presidents are highly constrained. What is particularly significant is that Trump's policies not only broke from the past, but were opposed by powerful domestic interests, especially in the business community. Immigration, both legal and illegal, fuels large segments of the economy, and the groups that benefit are fairly well organized. As far as trade is concerned, although some industries which were directly protected supported his moves, the business community as a whole strongly opposed the administration's protectionism. Our standard theories of policymaking and the distribution of power in the U.S. indicate that they should prevail. In some instances they did. The revisions of NAFTA were minor, and even higher tariffs were possible. Nevertheless, I think the extent of the trade wars and the restrictions on immigration show the limits of the power of even very strong domestic interest in the face of a committed president who is supported by the rest of the executive branch.

One obvious reply is that while the organized business interests that usually prevail were indeed overridden, larger if more diffuse domestic interests supported and drove these policies. Anti-immigrant and protectionist sentiments were central to Trump's election, and indeed even Hillary Clinton felt the need to renounce her previous free trade positions. So it would not be correct to say that the domestic sources of foreign policy were weak here. Rather, they underpinned Trump's election and his power, as well as his policies in this area. There certainly is something to this. Nevertheless, I think most of our standard theories would have credited the business interests with more influence than in fact they were able to exercise. Trump did break the mold here.

International institutions are another America First arena in which Trump exerted himself. Here the restraints were on both the international and the domestic levels, and Trump's record is mixed. He withdrew from the Paris agreement on climate change relatively easily, although the consequences of doing so in terms of actual changes in the release of greenhouse gases is unclear. There were significant changes from the Obama years, but they resulted from domestic deregulation, not renouncing international agreements.

Most dramatically, of course, Trump withdrew from the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This did have major consequences in terms of Iran breaching many of the limits that it had pledged to respect (although still stopping short of a nuclear weapon) and frictions with allies who had to cut trade with Iran or face painful secondary sanctions. Although elite foreign policy opinion (the "foreign policy establishment," colloquially now known as the "blob") strongly opposed the move, it had a little political power and so its impotence did not disturb significant IR theories (although one could argue that the case counts against Stephen Walt's arguments about the power of the blob).⁵ The international pressures to stay in the JCPOA, however, were quite strong, as exemplified by the flurry of visits by European leaders in the weeks before the final decision, and thus Trump's willingness to acting in the face of them is theoretically significant. (Although it would be a digression to follow out this thread here, it is interesting that there was speculation that Trump might not have withdrawn had he not had to sign sanctions waivers every six months, giving him a greater personal involvement.) On this issue, Trump's advisers, being very critical of the agreement, strongly urged him on, and withdrawing did not require the sustained action of officials lower down in the bureaucracy who supported it.

⁵ Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of the U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018).

The World Trade Organization (WTO) was also a target of Trump's ire, and here too he was able to overcome significant international opposition to weaken the organization, if not to construct a different arrangement. As in the related area of tariffs, legislation had delegated a great deal of power to the executive branch, and Trump's subordinates shared his disdain for the WTO. Furthermore, he could undermine it by simply refusing to approve appointments to the dispute resolution panels rather than having to take a series of positive acts that might have required others' assent. Here too, Trump showed that a committed president could ignore what previously seemed like established practices that had widespread support in the international community.

He also withdrew from the World Health Organization (WHO), doing so less on the grounds that it infringed on U.S. sovereignty than on the claim that it was excessively influenced by China, especially in its shielding the latter from the blame for the coronavirus outbreak. Here, too, he was unrestrained by the significant international and domestic opposition, and his move was facilitated by the fact that it did not require careful implementation but could be done by a stroke of the pen.

He had less success, or perhaps suffered a failure of nerve, with the most important institution in the American security universe. Consistent with his general view that American allies took advantage of the U.S., during the campaign Trump argued that it was carrying an excessive share of the burden of defending others and that NATO was a poster child for this unfairness. He therefore threatened to withdraw the nuclear security umbrella from countries that did not spend 2% of their GDP on defense (incorrectly describing the previous commitments made under the Obama administration and saying that this was money that was owed to NATO). Somewhat inconsistently, he also wondered what the U.S. was doing guaranteeing the security of unimportant and far-off countries that might drag it into their own disputes. Congress and the foreign policy elite were vocal in their opposition to this shift in policy, seeing NATO as foundational to a safer and more orderly world in which the U.S. had great influence. Allies were even more disturbed, but generally reacted by seeking to appease the president, or at least avoid openly opposing him.

In the end, while the effect of Trump's stance had important long-run consequences as I will discuss below, he did not renounce or withdraw from the alliance. (Experts debated whether he had the power to do so without the approval of Congress, but he certainly could have said that as long as he was president he would not automatically live up to the mutual defense promise of Article 5.) The reasons for his inaction remain unclear, but if the account of his National Security Advisor, John Bolton, is to be believed, it was a very close run thing and Bolton had to work closely with Secretary of State Pompeo to dissuade the president from taking this dramatic step.⁶ The failure here, or, to put it a different way, the strength of the constraints on the president, seem to be rooted less in the power of domestic interests and preferences or the power of the external environment than in Trump's anomalous failure to appoint top officials who shared his views.

Policy toward Russia similarly represents a relative victory for the view of a constrained president, and for somewhat the same reasons, although domestic sources played a larger role. Analysis is complicated by the fact that it is hard to figure out exactly what Trump wanted. During the campaign and throughout most of his time in office he said that he wanted better relations with Russia and that he thought he could work with President Vladimir Putin. But what this meant in terms of concrete policies like Ukraine, arms control, and the Russian role in Syria remained unclear, perhaps because Trump never gave these matters much thought. He was much more concerned with deflecting the argument that Putin had helped him get elected. Nevertheless, the general thrust of his desire was unambiguous: to reduce the conflict with Russia and to seek areas of common interest.

While I think it is clear that Trump failed, the explanation is less clear. Some of the constraints were international. America's allies were skeptical and, more importantly, Putin did not seem inclined to compromise and indeed may have welcomed hostility with the U.S. for its value in generating domestic support for him. Trump was constrained domestically as well: Congress was deeply skeptical of Russia and passed legislation mandating economic sanctions by veto-proof majorities and would have sought to rally public opinion against any moves it considered to be "soft" on Russia.

Perhaps Trump could have overcome these obstacles had he appointed officials who were skilled and shared his objectives and then carefully monitored and prodded them to see that the policy was on track. But while his first Secretary of State, Tillerson, may have wanted to improve relations with Russia, he was a remarkably ineffective leader and his successor was much more critical of Russia. In parallel, although National Security Advisor Michael Flynn shared Trump's views, he was not around long enough to have any impact, and his successors instead shared the Washington consensus that Putin was a dangerous adversary who needed to be contained. One possible explanation is that Trump really did not want to seek a rapprochement with Russia; it is more likely that he simply was not paying attention.

⁶ John Bolton, *The Room Where it Happened* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

Trump campaigned on a platform of defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which is hardly an unconventional position, and then withdrawing from what he called the “forever wars” in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, a less conventional stance. Not that anyone wanted these wars to continue indefinitely, but the consensus was that rapid withdrawal could be dangerous. Here Trump was able to get some but not all of what he wanted, and the constraints could not be entirely ignored. He was able to defeat ISIS, essentially by allowing the military to carry out the plans developed by President Obama.

But when he found himself trapped in Syria by the alliance with the Kurds that had been necessary to defeat ISIS, he rebelled and ordered the American troops to withdraw. He was not effectively inhibited by the reputational costs that most experts declared the international system would levy, but he was somewhat constrained by opposition from Congress and, even more, the Defense Department. For months the latter had “slow rolled” White House commands for plans to withdraw and when Trump persisted, Secretary Mattis resigned in protest. This did not lead the President to reverse his policy completely, but he did accede to demands from the security establishment that the American presence, even if reduced, not be entirely eliminated. (In a comically inept letter to President Recep Erdogan, Trump tried to broker a deal between Turkey and the Kurds, only to have Erdogan “throw the letter in the [trash] bin,” according to his spokesman.⁷ Trump was left free to claim that the mission of the remaining troops was to see that the oil fields remained in friendly hands, although the real purpose was to support the Kurds and limit the influence of Russia and Turkey.

In Afghanistan, Trump was able to reach an agreement with the Taliban by promising the complete withdrawal of American troops. Read literally, the only conditions were the Taliban’s not permitting territory it controlled to be used by terrorists who would strike the U.S. and its allies and opening of direct negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, although American officials claimed that full withdrawal would only occur after violence diminished and serious progress was made in the intra-Afghan negotiations.⁸ At the end of his term, Trump pledged that all troops would be out before he left office, and he settled for a reduction to a very low number despite the unanimous opposition of high ranking Pentagon officials and explicit prohibitions in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). So on balance Trump was able to go a significant distance toward ending American military involvement in the face of resistance from allies and Congress. But he was not able to completely overcome the opposition from within his own government. Trump might want to blame the “deep state,” but the major problem was his own lack of persistence and skill.

Trump’s policy toward North Korea showed both the power of a committed president to innovate and the limits of what a new policy could achieve, or at least the limits of the policy he pursued. I think it is fair to say that no previous president would have sought to begin rather than end the negotiating process with a summit meeting. Trump’s belief in the importance of personal relations and his inflated view of his skills in face-to-face encounters were central to what most observers saw as a bizarre approach that was doomed to failure. Neither the constraints of domestic hostility toward North Korea (including the doubts of his advisers) nor the reservations of allies, especially South Korea and Japan, had much impact. So Trump was relatively free to pursue this policy. But the international system in the form of North Korean power and preferences meant that little came of the adventure.

To discuss a subject as large as relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) during the Trump administration in one paragraph seems like a fool’s errand, but I think the salient points parallel those made for other policy arenas. Trump’s approach was unusual in the extent to which he saw relations with the PRC as a reflection of his personal relations with President Xi Jinping, and this often led him to gloss over or downplay significant conflicts, at least until the last year of his administration. His approach was also unusual in focusing on the bilateral trade deficit, which most economists felt was misguided. But Trump was not to be dissuaded, and this remained the center of his attention throughout his time in office. On the one hand, this demonstrated the weakness of domestic constraints, as most well-organized interests opposed his tariffs. But here too the external environment in the form of Chinese interests and power meant that while he could raise the price of goods from China, he could not alter the organization of the Chinese economy or wring major concessions from the PRC.

Of course this was not all that the Trump administration did. Indeed, at least as salient was the general shift to a much harder line and greater Sino-American hostility, but aside from Trump’s animus stemming from the spread of the coronavirus, these changes reflected the

⁷ “Turkey’s Erdogan “Threw Trump’s Syria Letter in the Bin,” BBS News, 17 October 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50080737>.

⁸ This position of conditionality was quickly endorsed by the Biden administration: *Statement by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan’s Call with National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib of Afghanistan*, White House Press Release, January 22, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/22/statement-by-nsc-spokesperson-emily-horne-on-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivans-call-with-national-security-advisor-hamdullah-mohib-of-afghanistan/2021>.

preferences of Trump's appointees, especially Secretary of State Pompeo. The administration produced a strategy for combating Chinese power, which was declassified at the very end of the administration,⁹ but its call for working with allies and acting strategically was defeated by Trump's lack of attention and erratic moves. Also important here is that the harder line was endorsed by much of the bureaucracy, especially in the Pentagon and a large segment of the Washington foreign policy establishment and the Democratic party, so it does not give us a test of what a maverick president can do.

It is easier to make changes when the new policy consists mainly of omission rather than of acts and when it can be implemented by the president himself. The twin and related examples are Trump's propensity for bonding with authoritarians and his belief that the U.S. had no business trying to improve human rights abroad. In the latter area it was the silence of Trump and his colleagues that spoke loudly, especially concerning Saudi Arabia, Turkey (except when an American pastor was held hostage), and North Korea. Human rights violations were added to the list of charges against the PRC in speeches by Pompeo, but this did not seem to be of major concern to the president. Congress, domestic groups, and some allies called on Trump to uphold the traditional American stance, but there was little they could do to make him act. Trump's praise for dictators was more active, but because it was largely verbal it did not depend for implementation on the cooperation of his subordinates, let alone Congress. Here too he could work in his way, but the very fact that all it required was to grant symbolic rewards like Oval Office visits and to refrain from criticisms meant that the impact, although not insignificant, remained limited.

Where does all this leave the Biden administration? Before the election I sketched out what I saw as some of the challenges and opportunities:¹⁰ and here I just want to point to the impact of the Trump years on what Biden can do. Most importantly, Trump taught the world IR 101: states cannot bind themselves to the course of action they will follow in the future. Of course all leaders know that, but the basic continuity in American foreign policy lulled many of them, and many American, into believing that American commitment to the liberal world order including NATO, multilateral economic organizations, and cooperation with allies was irrevocable. The new understanding that this is not so will complicate relations with both allies and adversaries. The former have welcomed Biden's election and are likely to try to show that they are good partners, although the EU's signing of the investment treaty with China in the face of Biden's request that they wait is an indication of the limits of the power of a warm atmosphere. While doing their best to solidify relations with the U.S., allies will realize that a new administration, perhaps one led by Trump or one of his children, could revert to a Trumpist policy. Excessive dependence on the U.S. will then be to be avoided.¹¹

Biden wishes to reach agreements with adversaries as well, most obviously an arms control agreement with Russia, trade agreements with China, and arrangements with Iran to limit its nuclear and missile programs as well as its disruptive behavior in the region. Were any of these agreements to be enshrined in a treaty, other countries might have some assurance that they would last (but only some—Trump, and George W Bush before him, withdrew from significant treaties). This is not, however, likely to be possible. Fortunately for Biden, extending the New START arms control treaty with Russia does not require Senate approval, and it is almost certain that any major agreement with Russia, China, Iran, or North Korea would have to be made without a treaty; domestic constraints loom large here

I doubt if Trump thought about the legacy he was creating when he renounced previous American commitments. But when he and Secretary Pompeo realized that he was not likely to serve a second term, they made great efforts to make it much harder for Biden to reverse Trump administration policies.¹² Many of the new sanctions against Iran were legally justified under anti-terrorism statutes, and so they cannot simply be waived if the Biden administration rejoins the JCPOA. Needless to say, this greatly reduces the value of any agreement to Iran. Cuba was designated as a state supporting international terrorism, and the Houthis in Yemen were declared to be a terrorist organization, moves that legally are difficult to unwind even if they are not supported by facts. There are no legal inhibitions

⁹ "US Strategy for the Indo-Pacific," cited in Josh Rogin, "The Trump Administration Had a China Strategy After All, But Trump Didn't Follow It," *Washington Post*, 15 January 2021.

¹⁰ Robert Jervis, "Foreign Policy Dilemmas and Opportunities for a New Administration: An Opinion Piece," *Political Science Quarterly* 135:2 (June 2020): 313-325.

¹¹ See the revealing data in European Council on Foreign Relations, "The Crisis of American Power: How Europeans see Biden's America," 19 January 2021 <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-crisis-of-american-power-how-europeans-see-bidens-america/>

¹² See, for example, Karen DeYoung, "Pompeo's Last-Minute Actions on Foreign Policy Will Complicate Biden's Plans for a New Direction," *Washington Post*, 16 January 2021.

against repealing Trump's last-minute loosening of restrictions on American officials meeting with representatives of Taiwan, or renouncing Pompeo's claim that Iran is now a "home base" for al-Qaeda,¹³ but there would be a political price for doing so. More generally, if Biden takes a less hardline policy or relaxes sanctions toward adversaries in an attempt to establish better relations, domestic opponents will accuse him of being weak, if not an appeaser.

There is another side to this coin, however: Trump's policies may have generated leverage that Biden can use. The sanctions and other forms of hostility directed at Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela have not changed the behavior of these countries (or changed their regimes), but they have weakened these states, and Biden's ability to change direction may be a significant source of influence. And if, contrary to the expectations of many observers, Biden maintains the pressure, that may have great effect because the target states' expectations of relief will have been frustrated.

In the Middle East, Trump's policy did less to generate leverage than it did to change facts on the ground. Whether this will be conducive to a stable peace or the reverse is unclear, but what is clear is that Biden inherits a situation that is very different from that which prevailed at the start of the Trump administration.

What this means, I believe, is that we cannot fully judge the Trump experiment at the end of his term. The impact of what he has said and done will last longer and, for better and for worse, carry over into the Biden presidency and perhaps beyond. The difference Trump's idiosyncrasies have made is, then, yet to be fully determined.

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¹³ Lara Jakes, Eric Schmitt and Julian E. Barnes, "Pompeo Says Iran Is New Base for Al Qaeda, but Offers Little Proof," *The New York Times*, 12 January 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/12/us/politics/pompeo-iran-qaeda-terror.html>.