

# H-Diplo | ISSF Policy Series

## America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

### “2016 Revisited: The Trump Presidency in Perspective.”

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Unlike, perhaps, any previous occupant of the Oval Office, the election of the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States in 2016 triggered intense soul-searching in America, and this introspective exercise is likely to continue for some time yet. Unfit for office in the first place, far from being tamed by the weight of his responsibilities, President Trump became more disruptive and dangerous with time. But whatever the economic costs or the social, racial, and cultural divisiveness of his brand of politics or the strain he has placed, by design, ignorance, or recklessness, on America’s constitutional arrangements, his turbulent presidency also left an imprint on international affairs, and historians will find in that period much on which to reflect and debate.

In my original H-Diplo essay I suggested that the institutions established in the aftermath of the Second World War had become fragile, that the alliances created then were fraying at the edges, and that the process of disintegration was accelerating. The Brexit vote in Britain and the election of President Trump in 2016 were symptoms of this process. At the time, it seemed as though the old structures of Western and indeed world politics were still alive, while a new order was struggling to break through their crust.<sup>1</sup>

This remains largely true today. It testifies to the innate resilience of these structures. The contours of the evolving international landscape, however, are more clearly discernible. They reveal a significantly changed environment. Its most prominent feature is heightened competition between various great powers. The ‘unipolar’ moment of the early 1990s is but a faint memory, and the American *hyperpuissance* overreached itself in the mountain ranges of the Hindukush and the dusty plains of Mesopotamia.<sup>2</sup> The People’s Republic of China and the United States now openly acknowledge their strategic rivalry. To that extent, the past four years have been marked by the revival of something akin to the bipolarity of the Cold War period.<sup>3</sup>

History does not replicate itself, and the present constellation differs from the twentieth-century East-West antagonism in significant ways. In the first place, China and the United States are not the only powers of weight and influence. A wider multipolar ring of powers is grouped around them, each with its own set of interests and ambitions, some ready to flex their muscles but none in a position to foist itself on others. And secondly, the shift in power away from the United States serves as a reminder that declining great powers tend to be reluctant leaders. The war against terror in Iraq and Afghanistan exposed and then exacerbated the mismatch between America’s power potential and international commitments, and it has exhausted the country’s readiness to shoulder the burden of hegemony.

Political will, indefinable, unquantifiable yet all-pervasive, is no less important than the objective realities of international power. This is a not a new phenomenon. In many ways, the presidential election of 1992 already marked a point of inflection at which America began to turn inwards. Had it not been for the events of 9/11, the presidency of George W. Bush would have continued this trend; he certainly ran on a largely domestic platform in 2000. The pendulum soon swung back again in the opposite direction. Under President Barack Obama

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The Waning of the Post-War Order: Historical Reflections on 2016 and the Emergence of a Twenty-First Century World Order’, Robert Jervis, Francis J. 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, 2018), 158-171 (first version online at <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5p-otte>).

<sup>2</sup> The classic exposition is Charles Krauthammer, ‘The Unipolar Moment’, *Foreign Affairs* lxx:1 (1990-1991), 23-33; for a survey of the French debate see Philippe Richardot, *Les Etas Unis, hyperpuissance militaire* (Paris: Economica, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2005).

<sup>3</sup> This has triggered considerable debate amongst International Relations theorists, see e.g., Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States and Geostructural Realism* (New York, 2018); but see already Yuan Xuetong, ‘Why a Bipolar World Is More Likely Than a Unipolar or Multipolar One’, *New Perspectives* xxxii:3 (2015), 52-56.

American policy sought to limit the country's international obligations and curtail its involvement in overseas conflicts in favour of domestic reconstruction.

There is a further difference with the old U.S.-Soviet competition. The new quasi-multipolar, semi-bipolar constellation does not tend towards stability. If anything, the reverse appears to be the case. World politics are vibrating to the persistent staccato rhythm of crises in the periphery. From Sub-Saharan and Northern Africa to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, the Western fringes of Russia and the Caucasus and on to Central Asia and the South China Seas, geopolitical fault-lines – some long dormant, others of recent creation – disfigure the world map with their livid colours. Indeed, it has become fashionable again to speak of great powers and the competition between them. In a recent intervention in the European Parliament Josep Borrell, Vice-President of the European Commission in charge of coordinating the external relations of the European Union (EU), emphasized the re-emergence of empires:

in general, Europe is facing a situation in which we can say that the empires are coming back. The old empires are coming back. There are at least three of them. We can say Russia, China and Turkey, big empires in the past, are coming back with an approach on their immediate neighbourhood and globally, which represents, for us, a new environment.<sup>4</sup>

The high hopes of 1989/91 of a never-ending present in the guise of Western-style free market democracies have evaporated; and empires have returned to international politics. They are back because of their economic and technological clout, as is the case with China; or because powers in the second flight of international politics sense weakness in others, which they are ready to exploit to further their own self-declared spheres of interest. This applies Russian policy under Vladimir V. Putin as much as it does to Turkey's neo-Ottoman policy under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Irrespective of their own specific circumstances, they are occupying spaces now vacated by the United States, unwilling rather than already unable to carry the burdens of leadership.

Even after four years in office, the Trumpian incantation of 'America First' never crystallized into a coherent or consistent set of principles or practices that shaped the administration's foreign policy.<sup>5</sup> Although lacking in content, it signified a much narrower definition of the U.S. national interest, often refracted through the president's personal and family interests. The unprecedented blending of the personal and the official was one of the distinguishing features of the Trump presidency; the narrower focus of U.S. foreign policy was not. To a not inconsiderable extent, Trump's foreign policy continued along a course set by his predecessor, albeit at an accelerated pace, often in erratic fashion and invariably resorting to the loudhailer methods of a microblogging social media platform where previous presidents preferred to speak softly. The focus on Asian affairs and on America's domestic problems – the inefficacy of the remedies offered notwithstanding – chimed in with the prevailing public mood.

If Trump's rhetoric was often alarming, and never knowingly subtle, he nevertheless turned out to be less belligerent than might have been expected at the time of the 2016 election. He wound down, but did not terminate, America's engagement in Afghanistan. The fight against the Islamic State organization continued, but it was more limited, often sporadic and rarely consistent, as was demonstrated by the casual abandoning of the U.S.-allied Kurdish forces in October 2019. Similarly, the hunting down at the same time of the fugitive Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was opportunistic and carried out with an eye to domestic effect rather than in pursuit of clear regional objectives. Trump did not start new wars, but here, too, he was inconsistent. He refrained from retaliating when units of Iran's Republican Guard shot down a US military drone in June 2019, but ordered the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Guard's elite *Quds* Force responsible for extraterritorial and clandestine military operations.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, whether by design or through inattention, aspects of Trump's policy are likely to become permanent. The move of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem is unlikely to be reversed, and the decision to freeze Palestinian representatives out of any negotiations may well help to bring greater stability to that part of the region. Here, too, however, the elements of continuity should not be overlooked, not least because a rapprochement between Israel and the Gulf Arab emirates had long been in the making.

A narrower, more transactional attitude characterized President Trump's approach to questions of international trade, which had acquired totemic significance for his type of politics. Presidential powers of decree meant that trade wars with China or the European Union were easy to start. No less significant was the fact that they appealed to Trump's brash, limelight-seeking personality and his performative style of politics. Such clashes proved rather more difficult to win, however. True, the president claimed victory with the so-

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<sup>4</sup> European Parliament debate on situation in Eastern Mediterranean, 14 September 2020, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-09-15-ITM-004\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-09-15-ITM-004_EN.html).

<sup>5</sup> Donald J. Trump, Inaugural Address, 20 January 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>.

called 'Phase One' trade agreement with China in early 2020, but 'victory' came at significant cost to US exporters, who were affected by Chinese retaliatory tariffs, and the American taxpayer, who had to foot the bill for subsidy payments to Midwestern soya bean farmers and pork producers. In other disputes victory remained elusive, too. The EU, a particular target of presidential ire, remained largely unmoved by threats and tariffs, and proved more than ready to retaliate with calibrated levies of its own.<sup>6</sup> A subsequent agreement in the summer of 2020 returned matters to the *status quo ante*, but also introduced a number of additional tariff reductions.<sup>7</sup>

After much treading of water the gains achieved were small, and much china had been broken in the course of the dispute. This mattered all the more since most EU member states are also members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. President Trump's bullying of America's NATO allies over burden-sharing made most of them loosen their purse strings and increase military spending. No less significant in achieving this, however, was a more pressing perception of Russian and Chinese threats to European strategic and commercial interests. Moreover, Trump's equivocation early in his presidency on America's continued adherence to Article 5 of the NATO treaty and his unilateral announcement of withdrawing or redeploying U.S. forces in Europe at the turn of 2019/20 shook confidence in America's reliability as a partner in the Western alliance. Even participation in high-profile NATO manoeuvres in Eastern Europe and the Baltic in 2019 could not undo the damage done to transatlantic relations. Belittling allies or treating the alliance as if it were a protection racket might not have struck previous U.S. presidents as a wise long-term strategy, but it certainly changed NATO's inner dynamics.

Throughout his time in office President Trump showed little inclination for the hard graft of maintaining existing alliances. He exhibited a fascination – strange but not uncommon in weak personalities or business leaders – with authoritarian or semi-autocratic 'strong men' such as Putin, Saudi Arabia's *de facto* ruler Mohammed bin Salman and, at least initially, the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, until the effects of their chocolate pudding summit at Trump's golf resort Mar-a-Lago in April 2017 ebbed away.

The meeting with Xi showed the limitations of Trumpian summitry. Much capital was invested in personal diplomacy, by preference with all the 'pomp-and-circumstance' trappings of a state visit and in the full glare of the media. There was little of the usual pre-summit preparatory work by diplomatic Sherpas, however, and the substantive achievements were minimal and, at best, temporary. Trump's dealings with the North Korean leader, Kim Jung-un, followed the same pattern. North Korea's nuclear ambitions were initially, in the summer of 2017, met with fierce 'fire-and-fury' rhetoric, but the three carefully choreographed meetings with Kim – in June 2019 Trump stepped symbolically across the ceasefire line between the two Koreas onto Northern territory – and subsequent working-level talks between officials at Stockholm yielded no meaningful results. As North Korea's nuclear and military build-up has continued largely unabated, there may soon be no alternative but to accept its status as a nuclear power, and American policy in the region may have to settle for some form of oversight regime, ironically something much weaker than the so-called Iran 'nuclear deal', from which the Trump administration withdrew in 2017.

Altogether, President Trump's foreign policy has been marked by a turning away from multilateral diplomacy. The period since 2016 thus produced the unique spectacle of the chief architect and promoter of many of the post-1945 international institutions turning on his own creation with a view to undermining them.<sup>8</sup> This has been especially the case with NATO, but also with the World Trade Organization, and the United Nations and UN-affiliated or -sponsored agreements and bodies, such as the Paris climate change accords, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) or the World Health Organization (WHO). All these institutions have been left diminished, their foundations weakened and their futures uncertain. American disengagement has allowed other powers, with different ideological orientations and a sharper appreciation of geopolitical realities, to occupy the spaces vacated by America, as is underlined by the growing presence of China in the UN.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began to affect much of the world from February 2020 onwards, once more revealed the disruptive and nihilistic streak in Donald Trump's politics. His refusal to take adequate measure to tackle the public health crisis at home is likely to

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<sup>6</sup> Maria Demertzis and Gustav Fredriksson, 'The EU Response to US Trade Tariffs', *Intereconomics* (2018), [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_20\\_1512](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_1512).

<sup>7</sup> Joint Statement of the United States and the European Union on a Trade Agreement, 20 August 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_20\\_1512](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_1512).

<sup>8</sup> Historical parallels are never exact, but President Trump's policy is reminiscent of Austria's occupation in 1846 of the autonomous Cracow republic, part of the 1815 settlement which Austria was determined to preserve. The occupation indicated that time had run out on the *status quo*.

leave a mark on the United States. Abandoning the WHO and repudiating international efforts, however, indicated a further retreat from the international system.

Elsewhere the President deliberately sought to dismantle international institutions such as arms control regimes. He pulled the United States out of international efforts to contain Iran's nuclear ambitions and its aspirations for regional dominance, and he suspended U.S. compliance with the 1986 Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty in response to Russian infringements of it. Moscow's misbehaviour could not be denied, but nor could the fact that American policy lacked any leverage to compel it to comply or a strategy for a new policy towards Russia.

U.S. policy since 2016 frequently appeared to be adrift, subject to the whims of the President and the currents created by others. From its graceless beginning to its undignified end, moreover, the Trump presidency diminished the 'soft power' of the United States and the West in general. The damage done to the inner workings of America's constitution by the president's authoritarian instincts, the divisiveness of his brand of politics, the whiff of kleptocracy that emanated from the White House, the unceasing efforts to delegitimise the institutions of government, and the mayhem on Capitol Hill unleashed by the defeated President in the dying days of his presidency did not go unnoticed abroad. They have dimmed the attraction of the idea of America, and they have reduced the ability of the United States to lead. Public policy announcements fuelled this process further. Refraining from overt interference over the suppression of the Uighur population in China's Xinjiang province or the crushing of pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong may have followed sound *realpolitik* calculations. To signal it in public did not. It merely weakened America and the attractiveness of the idea of the West.

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Power and the classic instruments of power politics – and their occasional use – will occupy a central position in twenty first-century international affairs, more so than in the previous three decades.

Future historians may well conclude that the Trump presidency was the political equivalent of honey fungus (*Armillaria mellea*), a bright orange-brown forest pathogen, that grew on the rotting tree trunk of U.S. politics. They may also conclude that President Trump accelerated the process of decay with his type of demagogic nativism, ceaseless campaigning and transgressions of accepted rules and norms. But he articulated in a new, brasher, often crude, inchoate and historically illiterate form an older strand of American isolationism. His stronger than predicted performance in the 2020 election suggests that Trumpism may well remain a powerful current in American politics. There is, after all, no cure for honey fungus, and overcultivation will not prevent the tree from succumbing to the fungus' extensive underground, tentacle-like rhizomorphs. This will constrain his successor, and it remains to be seen whether the enablers of Trumpism in Congress will continue their attempt at riding the tiger or whether they – or some of them – will decide that there is nothing for it but to shoot that beast.

Partly by design, partly by neglect, and partly out of ignorance, Trump withdrew the United States from the international scene and weakened many of the institutions and structures that had shaped international politics since 1945. The COVID-19 pandemic may well end delusions of an ongoing process of globalization, and the disruptions which the health crisis has caused may well be harbingers of a wider transformation in the way in which societies organize themselves and their economies. Up to the present moment, China has had a better crisis, and seems to have emerged in better condition from the emergency. President Trump confronted the rising power in East Asia, albeit without any coherent strategy, in sharp contrast to China, whose fourteenth five-year plan, currently under deliberation, has been framed with the strategic rivalry with the United States in view, irrespective of who might occupy the White House. As for U.S. foreign policy, the new administration will no doubt seek to revive multilateralism and America's existing alliances, especially with the Europeans, but it is not likely to become more deeply engaged in the Middle East and it will continue to shift attention to the challenge posed by China,<sup>9</sup> and that may be Trump's lasting foreign policy legacy.

In his disruptiveness and in his historical illiteracy, however, Trump may have created the conditions for new coalitions in Asia to take shape and for Europe to concentrate its mind on its own security.

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<sup>9</sup> See Joseph R. Biden, 'Why America Must Lead Again', *Foreign Affairs* xcix, 2 (March-Apr. 2020): 64-76; and also the speech by Kurt M. Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs under Barack Obama and a close foreign policy adviser to Joe Biden, at the London-based Policy Exchange think tank, 'The Future of the Indo-Pacific', 28 October 2020, <https://policyexchange.org.uk/pxevents/the-future-of-the-indo-pacific/>.

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