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Present at the Disruption

How Trump Unmade U.S. Foreign Policy

[Excerpts]

By Richard Haass



Trump inherited a valuable system and tried to repeal it without offering a substitute.

Numerous other dubious assumptions run through Trump’s worldview. Trade is portrayed as an unmitigated negative that has helped China take advantage of the United States, rather than as a source of many good export-oriented jobs, more choices along with lower costs for the American consumer, and lower rates of inflation at home. The United States’ domestic ills are attributed in large part to the costs of foreign policy, even though—while the costs, in lives and dollars, have been high—the share of economic output spent on national security has fallen in recent decades and is far below what it was during the Cold War, which happened to be a time when Americans were able to enjoy security and prosperity

simultaneously. There is ample reason to find fault with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq without blaming them for the condition of American airports and bridges. And although Americans spend far more on health care and education than their counterparts in many other developed countries do, the average American is worse off. All of which is to say, doing less abroad would not necessarily lead to doing more of the right things at home.

It is possible to understand this distorted framing of U.S. national security only by considering the context that gave rise to “Trumpism.” The United States emerged from the Cold War with no rivals, but also with no consensus as to what it should do with its unrivaled power. Containment, the compass that had guided U.S. foreign policy for four decades, was useless in the new circumstances. And policymakers and analysts struggled to settle on a new framework.

On trade, the administration has mostly rejected multilateral pacts, including the TPP, which would have brought together countries representing 40 percent of the world’s GDP and pressured China to meet higher economic standards. It has regularly resorted to unilateral tariffs, even imposing them on allies and using dubious legal justifications. And although the United States has not withdrawn from the World Trade Organization, the administration has tied it in knots by refusing to approve judges for the panel that adjudicates trade disputes. The one exception is the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement, which replaced the North American Free Trade Agreement. The USMCA is a curious exception, however, in that it departs only modestly from the harshly criticized NAFTA and borrows heavily from the text of the rejected TPP.

With China, Trump’s welcome willingness to challenge Beijing on trade has been undermined by what can only be described as an incoherent policy. The administration has

used confrontational language but has diluted any real leverage it might have had by bowing out of the TPP, incessantly criticizing (rather than enlisting) allies in Asia and Europe, and blatantly showing its hunger for a narrow trade deal that commits China to accepting greater American exports ahead of Trump's reelection campaign. The administration has been tardy or inconsistent in its criticism of China for its crackdown in Hong Kong and its treatment of the Uighurs in Xinjiang, and it has been mostly passive as China has solidified its control of the South China Sea. Meanwhile, reduced spending on basic research at home, the placement of new limits on the number of skilled immigrants allowed into the United States, and the inept handling of the COVID-19 pandemic have made the country less competitive vis-à-vis China.

A partial restoration of U.S. foreign policy is still possible, however. The United States could commit to rebuilding its relationships with its NATO allies, as well as its allies in Asia. It could reenter many of the agreements it exited, negotiate a follow-on pact to the TPP, and spearhead a reform of the World Trade Organization. It could adjust its immigration policy.

But there is no going back to the way things were. Four years may not be a long time in the sweep of history, but it is plenty long enough for things to change irreversibly. China is wealthier and stronger, North Korea has more nuclear weapons and better missiles, climate change is more advanced, the U.S. embassy has been relocated to Jerusalem, and Nicolás Maduro is more entrenched in Venezuela, as is Bashar al-Assad in Syria. This is the new reality.

Moreover, restoration on any scale will be inadequate given the extent to which disarray has spread under Trump. The United States will **need a new framework** for contending with a more assertive and repressive China, as well as initiatives that narrow the gap between the

scale of global challenges—climate change and infectious diseases, terrorism and nuclear proliferation, cyberwar and trade—and the arrangements meant to address them. Rejoining an inadequate Paris agreement, a soon-to-begin-expiring JCPOA, or a flawed WHO would not be nearly enough. Instead, a new administration will need to negotiate follow-on agreements on both climate change and Iran and partner with others to reform the WHO or bring about a new body to assume some of the global health burden.

And if Trump is reelected? Buoyed by an electoral victory that he would interpret as a mandate, he would likely double down on the central elements of the foreign policy that has defined his first term. At some point, disruption becomes so far-reaching that there is no turning back. *Present at the Disruption* could become *Present at the Destruction*.

Countless norms, alliances, treaties, and institutions would weaken or wither. The world would become more Hobbesian, a struggle of all against all. (This was actually previewed in May 2017 in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed written by two senior Trump administration officials: “The world is not a ‘global community’ but an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage.”) Conflict would become more common, and democracy less so. Proliferation would accelerate as alliances lost their ability to reassure friends and deter foes. Spheres of influence could arise. Trade would become more managed, at best growing more slowly, but possibly even shrinking. The U.S. dollar would begin to lose its unique place in the global economy, with alternatives such as the euro, and possibly the renminbi and various cryptocurrencies, growing in importance. U.S. indebtedness could become a major liability. **The global order that existed for 75 years would surely end; the only question is what, if anything, would take its place.**

A great deal hinges on which course the United States follows. Even a partial restoration would make Trump's foreign policy something of an aberration, in which case its impact would prove limited. But if his brand of foreign policy persists for another four years, Trump will be seen as a truly consequential president. In this scenario, the model embraced by the United States from **World War II until 2016 will prove to be the aberration**—a relatively brief exception in a longer tradition of isolationism, protectionism, and nationalist unilateralism. History makes it impossible to view this latter prospect with anything but alarm.

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