



Foreign Policy and the GOP: What Comes After the Trump Administration?

Will Inboden

On September 2, 1987, readers of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Boston Globe* opened their newspapers to find a full-page “open letter” from New York City real estate developer Donald J. Trump. Addressed “To the American People” and titled “There’s nothing wrong with America’s Foreign Defense Policy that a little backbone can’t cure,” it was a broadside against President Ronald Reagan’s national security policies. Trump complained, “For decades, Japan and other nations have been taking advantage of the United States. ...The saga continues unabated as we defend the Persian Gulf, an area of only marginal significance to the United States for its oil supplies, but one upon which Japan and others are almost totally dependent. ... The world is laughing at America’s politicians as we protect ships we don’t own, carrying oil we don’t need, destined for allies who won’t help.”¹

The immediate context was Reagan’s decision to reflag Kuwaiti oil tankers under U.S. Navy escort in the Persian Gulf to protect them from Iranian attacks. As a desperate Tehran lost ground in its war with Iraq, it sought to choke off the Gulf oil revenues that helped fund the Iraqi military and stymie the American, Japanese, and Western European economies by depriving them of Gulf petroleum shipments.

¹ This passage is adapted from my forthcoming book, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan in the White House and in the World*.

The larger context of the Trump lament reflected a fundamental difference with Reagan over the role of allies, trade, and America's role in the world. It shows that such competing visions of conservative foreign policy have been contested not just over the past four years but over the past 40 years. Indeed, the issue goes even further back to the dawn of the Cold War, when debates over Republican, and American, foreign policy featured internationalists such as President Dwight Eisenhower and Senator Arthur Vandenberg contending against the isolationism (nowadays known as "restraint") proffered by the likes of Senator Robert Taft Jr. In the 1970s, the Richard Nixon/Henry Kissinger/Gerald Ford wing of the GOP squared off against the Reagan insurgency over foundational issues such as *détente*, *realpolitik*, human rights, and a great-power contest against a Communist superpower, the Soviet Union.

The particulars of today's debates may have changed, but the themes and fault lines remain the same. Should the United States lead the free world and maintain a forward presence against adversaries or restrain itself to the hemispheric repose offered by two oceans? Are allies a net benefit or liability? Is free trade good or bad for America? Should the United States promote human rights and democracy in authoritarian countries, whether friend or foe? Does the United States spend too much or too little on defense? Should the United States seek to coexist with, compete with, or defeat a Communist great-power rival?

These questions arise amid major transitions in American foreign policy. Such shifts result from either major geopolitical shifts or domestic political realignments—and sometimes both in tandem. The combination of the return of great-power competition externally and the new populism within the GOP and new progressivism among Democrats internally recalls previous eras such as the 1890s, 1930s, 1950s, and 1970s. None of these decades are perfectly analogous with the present moment, but each is suggestive of the challenges and possibilities facing the United States—and conservative internationalism—today. The 1930s and early 1950s witnessed crests of isolationism; the 1930s and 1970s saw bouts of American decline and eroded geopolitical standing; the 1890s and 1930s brought domestic political realignments amid emerging great-power competitions; while the 1950s and 1970s heralded shifts in domestic politics amid Soviet bloc advances.

We should not let President Trump's outsized personality distort a clear reading of his influence on GOP foreign policy. Recent polling by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs shows that the foreign policy beliefs of Republican voters changed little during the Trump years. In sum, before Trump, during Trump, and after Trump, most GOP

voters remained generally internationalist, generally hawkish, and generally supportive of alliances and free trade. Similarly, there was and is a sizable minority of the Republican electorate holding more isolationist and protectionist convictions. The Reagan Institute's recent National Defense Survey reported similar findings.² In short, when it comes to foreign policy, President Trump serves more as a totem for a particular segment of the GOP than as a reshaper of GOP public opinion. The GOP electorate remains in play, and the internationalist wing still retains the largest segment of the base's support.

President Trump, the Trump Administration, and the Future of Conservative Foreign Policy

In any presidency there will be policy differences between the president and his top officials, differences among the top officials themselves, differences in the policies pursued at the beginning of the presidential term and those at its end, and even differences in the president's own mind as he wrestles with what to do. The Trump administration was no exception. If anything, the policy differences between President Trump and many of the appointees in his presidency were even more pronounced than other administrations. This further complicates any generalizations about "Trump administration foreign policy."

This analysis should be read in light of these distinctions, as it tries to evaluate the main features of Trump administration foreign and defense policies with both eyes on the future. It is illustrative rather than comprehensive. It aims foremost to provoke further discussion on the future of conservative foreign policy in the aftermath of the Trump era—whenever that "aftermath" will come to be.

The most consequential strategic innovation wrought by the Trump administration came in its recognition that a great-power competition is the primary strategic challenge facing the United States. This strategic paradigm should be preserved. The Trump administration, particularly former National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster and his team, deserves credit for stating this plainly and beginning to develop a strategy to address it. Even the Biden administration seems to have embraced this framework, a notable bipartisan validation (or at least a welcome nod to reality).

The main great-power peer competitor is, of course, China. The Trump administration should be lauded for both accelerating and

² See <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/05/27/trump-gop-foreign-policy-polling-490768> and <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan-institute/centers/peace-through-strength/reagan-institute-national-defense-survey/>.

cementing the strategic consensus that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is our main adversary and for beginning to reallocate resources and policies to address it. The CCP will almost certainly be the defining strategic threat for the next generation.

Within this framework, there are many unanswered questions and subsidiary policy challenges that a conservative foreign policy must address. First, what is the place of Russia in this great-power competition paradigm? Is it a threat of the same magnitude as China, a mere regional nuisance, or even a potential balancing partner against China? [For purposes of debate, this author inclines to a hawkish view that Russia—with its combination of nuclear arsenal, disinformation, and cyber assaults; aggression in its near abroad and in Syria; and malign intentions—poses a significant great-power threat to the United States.]

Second, what is our strategic goal toward China, and what means are we willing to employ to that end? On the former, is it to curtail China's aggressive external behavior, balance its regional hegemony, build an equitable trade relationship, or end the CCP's monopoly on power altogether? Numerous Asia experts and strategists in the Trump administration took up these questions and worked to answer them. These efforts, individual and collective, generated helpful insights and some effective policy lines but have not yet resulted in a consensus conservative strategy toward China. [Again, the author will tip his hand in favor of a near-term goal of curtailing China's aggressive behavior and an ultimate strategic goal of ending the CCP's monopoly on power.]

Third, what is the role of the broader Middle East, including Afghanistan, in the great-power competition with China? Is the region a tertiary distraction of "endless wars," draining resources and attention from the main event in the Indo-Pacific? Or is the Middle East an important theater in a global contest, home to vast energy reserves and shipping chokepoints critical to Asia and beyond, as well as a region important in its own right for reasons including Israel, terrorism, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction?

The Tools of Statecraft

One measure of an administration's foreign policy is its use of the tools of statecraft and the condition in which it leaves those instruments to its successor. In this respect, a signature Trump achievement that conservatives should continue is a restoration of national sovereignty, both as a building block of the international system and in particular as an American principle worth protecting. Sovereignty lies at the heart of self-government, accountable

behavior, and the nation-state as the basic unit of international politics. It clarifies and enables effective multilateral cooperation, participation in international organizations, enactment of treaty agreements, promotion of human rights and democracy, and other endeavors that skeptics of sovereignty sometimes distort.

Similarly, the Trump administration arrested the damaging defense budget cuts inflicted on the Pentagon by the Obama White House. While the Trump administration could have done more to restore defense spending to its needful levels—and done more to reposition the force for the competition with China—it nonetheless stopped the precipitous Pentagon decline that it had inherited.

In other areas the record is less salubrious. For example, President Trump held an impoverished view of American power that saw it merely in terms of industrial output and military strength. Both are essential; by themselves, they are also inadequate. Trump neglected other sources of American strength such as values, alliances, history, reliability, international leadership, and innovation. The net result weakened many of these tools and diminished American power and influence. In particular, America's alliances suffered under President Trump (with the notable exception of the U.S.–Israel relationship; even though Israel is not a formal treaty ally, Trump deserves credit for strengthening U.S.–Israel ties). Previous conservative presidents, Reagan foremost, appreciated what the United States' adversaries also know: America's alliances are a source of strength and asymmetric advantage. No other great power in the history of the world has enjoyed the alliance system that the United States has built and maintained for more than seven decades. Conservatives should not do any gratuitous favors for Beijing or Moscow by weakening our alliances.

However, the Trump administration did show creativity in wielding the economic arm of American power to great effect, particularly in its “maximum pressure” campaign toward Iran and its targeted sanctions and other tools of economic coercion against corporate entities of CCP state power such as Huawei. These innovations expanded the toolkit of non-kinetic coercive instruments and showed that some predictions of America's declining economic influence were exaggerated.

Another of President Trump's failures lay in a misalignment of force and diplomacy. Specifically, where President Trump extended diplomatic outreach, such as toward North Korea, he minimized or even abandoned the tools of coercion that could have strengthened that negotiating gambit. About the only good thing that can be said about Trump's North Korea policy is that it did not produce

worse results than the policies of other presidencies. Otherwise, it squandered U.S. leverage, sewed distrust with key allies such as Japan, helped solidify Kim Jong-Un's hold on power, and failed to curb North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles program.

On the flip side, when President Trump employed coercive tools, as he did with Iran, he failed to marshal an effective diplomatic effort. Although Tehran was perhaps a hopeless endeavor, he could have at least brought our European allies back aboard a multilateral pressure coalition. Similar deficiencies beset his policies toward Afghanistan, Turkey, and Russia. He signaled to the Taliban that he planned to withdraw all U.S. forces no matter what—thus undercutting his negotiators, marginalizing the beleaguered Afghan government, and assuring the Taliban that they need not make, or honor, any concessions (a policy that President Biden has, unfortunately, continued). He failed to retaliate against Russia for its election interference and failed to restore deterrence for its other aggressive actions. His desperation to withdraw all U.S. forces from Iraq and Syria conceded a free hand to Turkey against the Kurds, strengthened Bashar al-Assad, and benefitted Iran.

Although President Trump did enjoy foreign policy successes—for example, in midwifing the Abraham Accords or in trade negotiations updating the U.S.–Mexico–Canada trade agreement—they usually came when he aligned coercive tools with diplomacy.

On human rights and democracy, the Trump record is uneven. His administration's prioritization of international religious freedom and transcendently grounded human rights should be applauded. The State Department's Commission on Unalienable Rights was a worthy effort to recenter human rights policy and was unfairly distorted and maligned by its media and NGO critics. The Trump administration also mounted an admirable, albeit unsuccessful, effort to bring freedom to Venezuela and was right to designate China's depredations against Uyghurs Muslims as genocide. In other areas, President Trump gave too much of a pass—at times even succor—to dictators, whether foes such as Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong-Un, and Xi Jinping, or partners such as Mohammed bin Salman. Again, the record of our group's namesake shows that the United States is capable of pressing allies for democratic reform while preserving important economic and security cooperation. Recall the democratic transitions in the 1980s of South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, and other anti-Communist partners. This is a legacy that conservative internationalists should reclaim.

Two Parting Shots

First, President Trump's persistent efforts to foment divisions in the American body politic also damaged our national security by exacerbating rifts, undermining shared purpose, and creating opportunities for our adversaries (principally Russia and China) to exploit these divisions through social media mischief and other disinformation campaigns. To be sure, prominent Democratic politicians, the media, and other tribunes of the Left share much blame for these divisions too. However, conservatives should be focused on politically unifying the 60 to 70 percent of the country that identifies with the Right or Center, while honoring the Constitution and pursuing the common good for the entire nation. Conservatives should not unduly exacerbate divisions by pandering to a tribal base of just 25 to 30 percent of the electorate or by refusing to accept an election outcome and peaceful transfer of power.

Second, Americans are less concerned with whether their foreign policy is conducted by "elites" than with whether it succeeds. In the foreign policy realm, internecine disputes over the "establishment" and "outsiders" are silly distractions, unworthy of a great nation. Foreign policy positions are, by their nature, elite roles, whether they are held by people in the U.S. government in any presidential administration or at a policy think tank or university of any flavor. There are competent and incompetent elites, and there are honorable and unscrupulous ones. Let us encourage competence and honor. The American people, of all classes and backgrounds, deserve no less.