



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

*A Response from Jamil Jaffer*

Will Inboden’s assessment of and recommendations for the future of GOP national security policy are, without a doubt, solid. He is, for example, exactly right we should preserve the strategic paradigm of great-power competition with China. Further, he is right that we should have a near-term goal of limiting China’s aggressive behavior and a long-term goal of ending the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) monopoly on power. On Russia, he is likewise right to be deeply concerned about its nuclear capabilities, its use of cyberspace as a free-fire zone, its use of disinformation to stoke discontent in the United States and elsewhere, and its aggression in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Inboden is also right to call for a more aggressive U.S. posture toward Russia, although it is not clear that his characterization of Russia as a “great power” is accurate, given the relative size of the threat it poses to the United States as compared to China. And Inboden is likewise correct when he encourages the GOP to call for increased—and more China-focused—defense spending, as well as to advocate for a more robust use of our alliances in supporting our interests across the globe. When it comes to the twin notions that we need not choose between our values and our interests because they most often align with one another and that American hard power is most effective when used alongside a strengthened version of soft power, Inboden borrows a page from President Ronald Reagan, who effectuated just such policies.

Yet while the answers to the key questions Inboden asks at the beginning of his paper may be self-evident from a traditional Republican national security—and conservative internationalist—perspective, they nonetheless divide the political GOP today. For

example, there can be no question that the United States must lead the free world, rejecting the siren song of isolationism and maintaining a strong forward presence abroad to stave off wars before they approach our borders. However, many Republicans in Congress—and the former president—disagree. Many are prepared to retreat home and hope to hide from the world, relying on our two oceans for security.

There should likewise be little doubt in the minds of true conservative internationalists that allies are a net benefit, particularly when we make common cause with them around our shared interests, as traditional Republican national security leaders have done for three generations. Yet the former president mocked nearly all our allies and pushed them away on a regular basis. And yes, it is true, free trade is good for America—as long as it is truly free and fair. Many GOP members in Congress, however, question this approach and wish for a return to a mercantilist past. To be sure, a balanced trade policy that includes a strong industrial policy for critical technologies is appropriate (particularly when it comes to China, which regularly flouts international norms). However, the approach of many Republicans to toss away free trade like a passing fad is truly a mistake.

Indeed, Inboden’s hopeful assessment at the core of his paper—that conservative internationalism remains a highly viable near-term concept for the modern political GOP—is one that may, unfortunately, be proven wrong, at least for now. Indeed, if President Donald Trump (or someone that shares his penchant for isolationism and populism) becomes the next Republican president, we ought to be prepared for conservative internationalism and traditional Republican national security policy to face an even longer night in the wilderness.

Inboden points to polling numbers that purport to show traditional national security views continue to hold sway among the self-described Republican base. However, these same Republican voters have overwhelmingly supported a presidential candidate for two election cycles (and may for a third time), who simply does not hold the majority (or perhaps even a handful) of those views.

For example, President Trump—just like Democratic Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden and self-described Democratic Socialist Bernie Sanders—believes fervently in ending all “endless wars.” This view is most assuredly *not* Republican national security orthodoxy, nor is it grounded in conservative

internationalism. Republicans generally believe in fighting wars until they are won, particularly the type of wars like the Global War on Terrorism that have kept us relatively safe at home for two decades. And conservative internationalists certainly do not leave our allies—who have increasingly fought (and won) our wars for us—out in the cold. Yet, just like President Obama before him and President Biden after him, that is exactly what President Trump did. By doubling down on getting American troops out of Afghanistan while our European allies picked up the slack, each of these presidents left our Afghan allies to hang and our European colleagues holding together what little there was left to preserve. Likewise in Iraq, President Trump claimed credit for the destruction of ISIS's territorial caliphate yet proceeded to abandon the Kurds (who actually fought and won that conflict for us) to satisfy an erstwhile authoritarian ally. This move has shades of President Obama's encouragement of the Syrian uprising and other movements across the Middle East and North Africa, including the Iranian Green movement, only to abandon them when the going got tough. And let us not forget that it was President Trump—not some antimilitary, socialist do-gooder—who suggested we should pull our troops out of South Korea and Germany. Again, these are hardly traditional Republican positions.

President Biden will now have to bear the heat of his ultimate decision to complete the Obama-initiated and Trump-supported retreat in Central Asia and the political costs of bailing out of Afghanistan in the most tone-deaf way possible—on the 20th anniversary of the murder of 2,996 Americans. However, we should be clear that it was a Republican president, Donald Trump, who tried hard to get us out even sooner and who would have expanded this military retrenchment globally. Indeed, as Inboden himself notes, these strains of isolationism and skepticism about the use of American power were nothing new for Donald Trump. To the contrary, these views date back to the late 1980s, when he attacked President Reagan's national security policies before becoming a card-carrying Democrat for nearly a decade.

Now, as Inboden points out, certain important aspects of the Trump administration's national security policies do, in fact, sit firmly in the heart of traditional Republican approaches to national security. The Trump administration's defense of American sovereignty, its (eventual) tough stance on China, its maximum pressure campaign on Iran, its prioritization of religious freedom around the globe (including its highlighting of the outrageous treatment of the Uyghur Muslims by the CCP), and its restoration of (some) critical defense spending are, without a doubt, decisions that true conservatives ought to applaud. But as Inboden also points out, for each of these policies that his more conservative staff and cabinet were able to put

in place, dozens of other opportunities were squandered or walked back by the very man that Republican voters desperately sought to put in office for a second term. Whether one looks to President Trump's coddling of Vladimir Putin and his public refutation of the U.S. intelligence community in favor of that former KGB apparatchik (a position he doubled down on just last month), his discovery of a kindred spirit in Xi Jinping (at least pre-COVID-19), or his belief that he could win over Kim Jong-Un with bluster and bravado, he is hardly the type of leader that conservative national security Republicans would historically have supported.

Yet here we are. In November 2020, over 90 percent of Republicans voted for President Trump. Even now—after the January 6th insurrection brought the worst threat to the Capitol since its targeting by al Qaeda in 2001—74 percent of Republican voters support a review of the 2020 presidential election results, 51 percent believe that information will be uncovered that will change the election's outcome, and 59 percent think that former President Trump should play a "major role" in the GOP's future. This is a far cry from the traditional type of Republican conservative national security voters who have historically put country before party—and both country and party before any individual leader.

And it is not just the personal politics of President Trump that are troubling. It is what this sustained groundswell of support for him as the leader of the modern political GOP means for Republicans in Congress. One need only look at the composition of the House GOP, the outrageous ousting of Representative Liz Cheney (a true Reagan-style national security conservative), the ongoing efforts to primary elected leaders like Representative Anthony Gonzalez, and the inability of the majority of congressional Republicans in both houses to get behind a commission to investigate the horrific events of January 6th for fear of political reprisals to see that Trump's political coattails extend well beyond his own candidacy. Indeed, many of the new members of Congress elected by GOP voters—including some notable Republican insurrectionists—trend strongly toward isolationism and populism.

If all this is true, what does it mean for the future of Republican national security policy? Unfortunately, at least in the short term, probably nothing good. While there can be no question that our movement—whether one calls it traditional Republican national security policy, conservative internationalism, Reagan-style leadership, or something else—will ultimately prevail in the long-run, barring a major global event on the scale of 9/11, it is perfectly reasonable to fear that the immediate politics of our party will make it hard for this movement to return to the fore in the present moment.

No matter the general views of the party's base, they are currently voting in a direction that makes it nearly impossible to sustain an across-the-board return to true conservative foreign policy ideals now.

What does that mean for those of us who truly believe that this is the right path for our nation? Here are a few straightforward steps:

1. We must keep the flame of this philosophy alive by discussing it, debating it, and advocating for it out in the world.
2. We must seek to cut out of the party the cancer of populism and isolationism.
3. We must not kid ourselves that continuing to internally coddle this movement—and its people—will lead eventually to some magic reconciliation.

The populist, isolationist movement within the Republican Party (which may or may not be a numerical minority, as Inboden suggests) is clearly ascendent today, if not clearly winning by a significant margin. If true conservative foreign policy is to survive and prevail, we must be prepared to cut the isolationist, populist movement off at the knees. Anything else will keep true conservative national security in the political wilderness for much too long. Leadership requires tough choices. Let's put our party to them, and let's do it now.