



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

*A Response from Mary Kissel*

In December 2018, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo attended a session of NATO foreign ministers in Brussels to discuss a pressing threat to transatlantic security: Russia's repeated breaches of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. As he sat in the military alliance's cavernous amphitheater, the secretary's counterparts to a person voiced emphatic support for the United States' record of compliance with the 1987 treaty, agreed unanimously that Russia had egregiously violated its terms, and gave Moscow 60 days to return to compliance.

That grace period was the result of a debate within the Trump administration about whether to withdraw immediately from the treaty or give Moscow one last chance to reverse course and afford political cover to European allies who worried about the optics of a hasty decision. In the end, the latter view prevailed, and the entire NATO alliance endorsed the U.S. withdrawal. Yet, this diplomatic victory for the free world, which sent a strong message about the importance of compliance with international agreements, was soon forgotten in foreign policy circles back in Washington.

That sequence was not a one-off, as observers often focused more on President Donald Trump's rough-and-tumble rhetoric than the methods and outcomes of his policies. There are important questions to be asked and answered about this recent period in our history. Why did President Trump see the threat from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) so clearly, when other presidents did not? How could a businessman from New York clinch Middle East peace accords that eluded prior administrations? Why had the Republican foreign policy

machine not pressed harder for allies to fulfill their commitments or for international institutions to hew to their missions?

As Will Inboden skillfully captures in his essay, the Trump era has created a nascent debate about the legacy of those years, what can be learned, and what a Republican foreign policy should look like going forward. This is a welcome and healthy development. However, the current cogitation will not be productive without an honest accounting of the Trump record and our allies' and partners' willingness to cooperate with us. The task is urgent, especially as the free world faces new and profoundly complex challenges from China, Iran, Russia, terrorist groups like Al Qaeda, and other bad actors.

Inboden references President Trump's economic record, and that is a good place to start. Perhaps the most underappreciated aspect of President Trump's foreign policy is how it was underpinned by economic strength at home. The 45th president enthusiastically embraced President Ronald Reagan's peace through strength maxim, enacting 1980s-style tax reform and comprehensive regulatory relief while investing in our national defense. Thanks to the record job creation and economic boom, the Trump administration was able to start to rebuild the U.S. military and, importantly, U.S. deterrence, after decades of neglect and decline. While the Trump trade team wielded tariffs as a weapon, often to the detriment of U.S. domestic industries, the president loudly and often supported freer trade and caviled against nations that did not practice it. Should a future GOP foreign policy tolerate unequal trade deals with the balance tipped against America? Of course, we should not—but we did for decades, and President Trump tried to correct that error. Although his focus on trade deficits might have been misguided, the Trump economic legacy should be viewed in a more complete and complimentary fashion, given the extraordinary results.

With regard to our foreign policy, the Trump administration was not instinctively isolationist, as Inboden suggests. In the Middle East, the United States worked with Gulf allies to enact a maximum pressure campaign on the Islamic Republic of Iran to curb its terrorist activities, surged troops into Saudi Arabia, and forged peace accords between multiple Arab states and Israel. In the Asia-Pacific theater, the administration revived the Quad, tried a new approach to the North Korean nuclear challenge, and took pains to improve ties with smaller partners like the Maldives. No administration in recent memory spent as much time courting our partners in the Americas and the Caribbean or reviving our focus on the Arctic. Would an isolationist president have worked so hard to shore up NATO's finances, marshal more than 60 nations to reject China's surveillance

state and other forms of malign influence, or coordinate allies to protect the integrity of important UN agencies such as the World Intellectual Property Organization?

These achievements are hard to square with the isolationist label. It might be more accurate to say that the Trump administration focused less on rhetorical flourishes and grand theories of international relations and more on results. That approach led to a presidency that was very active on the world stage but not wedded to a permanent presence abroad when it was unnecessary. Putting America First was not a sly reference to what Inboden calls “noxious historical baggage.” It was a simple reiteration of a principle that conservatives roundly support; that is, using our national security policy to further the interests of the American people.

Inboden is not wrong in his critiques of the president’s often gratuitous overtures to authoritarians, which harmed America’s unique moral authority. President Trump may have thought that his personal charisma would tempt these leaders into negotiations and, ultimately, better behavior. He is not the first president to believe that to be true. (Recall George W. Bush’s statement, “I looked the man [Putin] in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. . . I was able to get a sense of his soul.”) But President Trump’s outreach obscured the punitive and multilateral measures his administration took to contain these regimes. No administration in recent history was tougher on Vladimir Putin or did more to rally the world against Communist China’s malign activities.

Perhaps the most difficult question the Trump era raises is what we should expect of our allies and partners who act, as we do, on conviction or domestic political calculations of their own. President Trump could not convince traditional Western European allies to snap back UN sanctions on Iran or to rally behind real reform of a dangerously inept and corrupt World Health Organization, even though we perceived both to be in their interests and ours. Critics of the administration attribute these failures to President Trump and Secretary Pompeo’s sometimes-hectoring style. But is that explanation wholly satisfactory? Would a kinder, gentler American diplomacy have convinced Chancellor Angela Merkel, for instance, to sever Germany’s ever-closer ties with Putin’s Russia, or does Berlin have values and interests that differ from our own? One lesson of the Trump years is that we must not be afraid to reassess our alliances and judge them on their own merits—and form new ones, when need be, as we did with Brazil and Greece.

Inboden asserts that the GOP has already adopted some aspects of the Trump foreign policy, from its focus on national sovereignty,

recognition of great-power competition as “the primary strategic challenge facing the United States,” and reorientation of human rights policy back to first principles. This is all to the good, especially as Communist China presents an ever-more-dangerous and complex threat to the United States and our free world allies and partners. Unlike the former Soviet Union, Beijing has constructed vast networks of economic partnerships and lobbyists here in the United States and elsewhere to obscure and further the party’s ambitions. The CCP is no Soviet Union. It is far more strategic and already inside our gates.

Inboden is surely right to call for Republicans to unify their base and adopt a civilized debate about the future of GOP foreign policy in the face of such challenges. We need that vigorous exchange now—and more urgently than ever.