

Back to Basics

How to Make Right What Trump Gets Wrong

Kori Schake

U.S. President Donald Trump's sharp-elbowed nationalism, opposition to multilateralism and international institutions, and desire to shift costs onto U.S. allies reflect the American public's understandable weariness with acting as the global order's defender and custodian. Over the last three decades, post-Cold War triumphalism led to hubris and clouded strategic thinking. After the 9/11 attacks, Washington stumbled badly in Afghanistan and Iraq; more recently, Russia has reasserted itself in eastern Europe and the Middle East, and China's economic and military power have significantly expanded. Even among Trump's opponents, these developments have led many to conclude that the only solution is a fundamental rethinking of U.S. strategy.

This is an overreaction. In truth, the pillars of U.S. strategy for the past 70 years—committing to the defense of countries that share U.S. values or interests, expanding trade, upholding rules-based institutions, and fostering liberal values internationally—have achieved remarkable successes and will continue to serve the country well

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going forward. Although some changes are certainly necessary, the biggest risk now is that the United States will in the process of making those changes scrap what is best about its foreign policy.

In his blunt and often crude way, Trump has proved brilliant at poking holes in pieties and asking pointed questions about long-standing principles. His answers to those questions, however, have been self-defeating at best and dangerous at worst. By revealing what happens when U.S. strategy becomes untethered from the ideas that built the American-led order, Trump's time in office should serve as a wake-up call—but not as a cause for fundamental change. On the contrary: as the costs of an “America first” approach become clear, advocates of a more traditional, global-minded American leadership will get another hearing. They should seize the opportunity by offering a vision of a reformed and updated U.S. foreign policy. But a new vision of the U.S. role in the world should reaffirm some core principles—namely, that the United States can best achieve its objectives through mutually beneficial outcomes that reduce the need for enforcement and encourage like-minded countries to share burdens.

YOU NEVER HAD IT SO GOOD

For all the panic and self-doubt that the political turmoil of recent years has brought, the current crisis is hardly without precedent. In fact, for most of its history, the United States faced more formidable challenges and had fewer resources than it does today. George Washington would have loved to negotiate a multilateral trade deal from a position of economic strength rather



Making nice: Pompeo at the UN Security Council, New York City, January 2019

than having to bring a fledgling nation into being amid hostility from much stronger states. Abraham Lincoln would have considered banding allies together to counter a rising China an easy day's work compared with passing the 13th Amendment or preventing international recognition of the Confederacy. Franklin Roosevelt would have been right to see managing a glut of capital as less complicated than resuscitating the entire U.S. economy.

The United States has the most propitious geopolitical environment any country could hope for: surrounded by oceans and peaceful, cooperative neighbors. The U.S. economy generates jobs and drives technological innovation. The country's hegemony in the global balance-of-payments system is so secure that investors are indifferent to its indebtedness and Washington can impose sanctions on foreign entities and

governments with impunity. The United States is a dominant power that other strong states voluntarily work to support rather than diminish—a historical anomaly. Its military is so capable that its adversaries have to operate on the margins of the conflict spectrum, in the realm of insurgency or information warfare. The country's cultural products are appealing and accessible, and its language serves as the lingua franca for international transactions.

What is more, U.S. domestic politics are not more contentious than in previous eras. "Every single president in American history thought that he was the most maligned person who had ever held the office, suffered the most vitriolic press attacks, and had to deal with the most ferocious partisanship," the historian Ron Chernow has written. Andrew Jackson said that his only regrets as president were that he didn't shoot

Henry Clay or hang John C. Calhoun. The abolitionist Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner was caned nearly to death on the floor of the Senate in 1856. There have been countless attempts to kill a sitting U.S. president, four of them successful.

Yet Americans have persuaded themselves that their present challenges are less comprehensible and their politics more venal than those of eras past. This mindset exaggerates current difficulties and excuses inaction—and it distorts views of the rest of the world, too, as Americans overestimate the complexity and difficulty of the problems the United States faces on the international stage. Foreign policy isn't newly complicated—it has always been—and the United States must simply get on with the tough work of devising strategies to advance its interests.

FROM OVERREACH TO RETREAT

The United States' global standing today is hardly disastrous, but it is still far from ideal. Many of the problems the country faces stem from the fact that in the wake of the Cold War, many American foreign policy elites persuaded themselves that the arc of history bends toward liberal democracy, ignoring ample evidence that, in fact, it bends whichever way people wrench it. This sense of inevitability caused hubris. It dulled leaders' capacity for making careful cost-benefit calculations, and they began to believe that they could dictate outcomes instead of weighing gains and sacrifices in the pursuit of their goals.

When opponents acted, the United States overreacted. Al Qaeda's attacks, for example, succeeded in provoking responses that dramatically diminished

the United States' global standing. Invading Iraq, in particular, squandered so many American advantages—moral, institutional, budgetary, and military. Those self-destructive choices cast a long shadow, leading some to question the value of the leadership role that Washington had created for itself. Disillusionment with the war in Iraq stirred broader complaints, as critics of U.S. foreign policy expressed frustration with free-riding allies, questioned the value of free trade, and supported retrenchment. Many of these views are an understandable reaction to U.S. overreach abroad and to rapid economic and social change at home. They had already gained traction prior to Trump's rise; he merely exploited them.

Trump is a powerful critic of existing practices but lacks the competence to deliver better outcomes. Rather than offering a policy corrective, his administration is making matters worse by weakening a beneficial order without building a more advantageous one. Trump uses multilateral summits to insist that sovereignty matters more than agreed rules and practices, rebukes trade and security arrangements as unfair, and considers allies a burden rather than an advantage. He acts as though the United States gains little from the existing order, when in fact it is the biggest beneficiary.

Consider the issue of allied burden sharing. U.S. allies in Europe are among the safest and most prosperous states in the world, yet these countries struggle to take on the responsibility to realize the international outcomes they profess to seek. France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, for example, could each win a war against Iran, yet none of

them has a foreign policy based on that reality. Instead, long-running U.S. complaints about burden sharing have convinced these states that they cannot exert military force and prevail unless the United States fights alongside them.

Asking whether U.S. allies do enough is the wrong question: they don't. The right question is what policies would cause them to do more. The Trump administration believes that if it steps back, they will step forward. In fact, when the United States steps back, its allies step back even further—and its adversaries step forward. If the United States withdraws its forces from Afghanistan, its allies will not ramp up their presence there; they will follow suit and leave. When Trump announced that U.S. forces would be removed from Syria, other members of the coalition against the Islamic State (or ISIS) scrambled for the exit, too.

This dynamic plays into the hands of U.S. adversaries, chief among them Russia and China. Russia is on the decline demographically and economically, but it is far from a failing state. It has excelled at sustaining authoritarians, such as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad; destabilizing eastern Europe; and weaponizing the openness of free societies through covert meddling, as in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Some hope this subversive activity will subside when its chief architect, Russian President Vladimir Putin, leaves office. But there is no telling what will happen as long as he remains in power.

The Chinese Communist Party, for its part, seeks access to markets and technology to power the economic development on which its claim to legitimacy rests, yet Beijing has rejected

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Washington's invitation to become a "responsible stakeholder" in the existing order. Instead, it has breached the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS, by building military bases on disputed territory in the South China Sea. It has violated the terms of the World Trade Organization through its forced technology transfers from foreign to domestic companies. And its brand of authoritarian capitalism has become a model to emulate among regimes that desire Western prosperity without the constraints imposed by the rule of law and the economic volatility that comes with genuinely free markets.

Put simply, the United States invites challenges by calling into question its alliance relationships; its allies do the same through their military weakness. In addition, Washington has enfeebled international institutions by flouting the rules it demands that others follow, such as those of UNCLOS, which it has not ratified. U.S. allies, by contrast, have empowered international institutions to a degree not supported by their publics, as the current backlash against an ever-closer union in Europe illustrates. In the meantime, adversaries have been capitalizing on the gap between those two tendencies.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

A more prudent foreign policy would start with two basic concerns, perhaps best summarized by Henry Kissinger in 2016: "What are we trying to achieve, even if we must pursue it alone?" and "What are we trying to prevent, even if we must combat it alone?" U.S. foreign policy, above all, should achieve the political independence and economic prosperity of the United States and

prevent the coalescing of forces that could threaten those things.

Independence, however, is not autarky. Acting in concert with others reduces costs by pooling resources. Resilient, rules-based institutions create predictability, incentivize weaker states to share burdens, and offer strong states forums in which their actions can be legitimated. Critics fear that alliances will drag the United States into wars. Historically, however, the reverse has been true: Washington has cajoled others into helping shoulder the burden of wars it has chosen.

U.S. leaders won't find solutions by merely pandering to angry and anxious citizens, as Trump has done. Still, the foreign policy community must become more responsive to the public. The U.S. government at large is a government of amateurs. This means that even the least fit candidate can run for office and win, but it also helps Washington remain in sync with public opinion. Eight thousand political appointees flow in and out of government with each presidential administration, bringing commitment to the president's agenda with them. Civil society has enormous influence on policy formulation. Richard Armitage, during his confirmation hearing to become deputy secretary of state, joked that "foreign policy is not an exotic rite practiced by an ordained priesthood," yet foreign policy has become an elite preserve, undermining the vitality that is needed for sustained public support. The foreign policy establishment needs to work harder to engage the public and open its ranks to more itinerant participation. The government should actively involve civic groups and nongovernmental organiza-

tions in foreign policy, trusting that activity outside the government's direct control can still be in its interest. And Congress needs to claw back some of the powers it has ceded over the years to the executive branch by exercising its authority over the use of military force.

Trump, like President Barack Obama before him, is not wrong to question why the United States embarks on nation-building missions abroad when it should rather be doing so at home. One need only take a train in Germany to see what countries can achieve by investing in infrastructure rather than expeditionary military forces. Nation building at home would soften the effects of globalization and technological innovation on U.S. workers and minimize the political fallout of these economic shifts. Only by addressing voters' justified concerns about their economic future can leaders regain the public's trust.

Officials will also have to show that the government is frugal with the public purse. Too often, the United States doesn't so much devise a strategy as throw money at problems abroad. Especially since the 9/11 attacks, which dramatically lowered the government's risk tolerance, the cost-benefit ratio of U.S. foreign policy has been abysmal. The United States must develop more cost-effective approaches. For instance, rather than countering Russia's threat to NATO by deploying conventional forces in Europe, where Moscow's massive troop strength already gives it a head start, Washington could ramp up its military presence along Russia's Pacific coast and islands at far lower cost. It should also find a less expensive substitute for striking terrorist convoys than the high-end weaponry it currently uses.

DIPLOMACY DONE RIGHT

After Trump, Washington will need to return to its traditional habit of incorporating liberal democratic values into its foreign policy. Transactional relationships are easy to form but just as easy to drop. Alliances bound together by ideological commitment, by contrast, are much less likely to come undone. It is no coincidence that the NATO alliance is robust, whereas the Central Treaty Organization, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, and other regional alliances failed to get an enduring U.S. treaty commitment: shared values bound the transatlantic countries tightly to one another and made extended deterrence credible. Political scientists may extol the benefits of "realism," or a values-neutral, pragmatic approach to advancing U.S. interests, but the public and Congress tend to be more idealistic.

Moreover, U.S. foreign policy will be interpreted as values-driven whether Washington wants it to be or not. As scholars such as Thomas Wright have argued, opponents tend to view any U.S. actions as ideologically motivated. The Russian government, for example, believes that Washington seeks to overthrow it, because, in Moscow's eyes, hostility to Russian power is an unalterable element of American political culture. U.S. policy tweaks are unlikely to disabuse the Russians of this conviction.

To be sure, the United States should avoid strident moralistic grandstanding. Modesty is a winning attribute in a great power, and the United States has too many faults of its own to cast itself as an irreproachable model. Countries will choose their own path and in their own time. Still, Washington can afford to support forces for positive change

abroad. These include the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, Rotary International, religious groups, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and other organizations that tie their aid to good governance. Expanding the State Department's budget to fund and support more of these programs is a much better approach than investing this money in the defense budget.

A more modest foreign policy needs to be accompanied by a more modest posture. The United States has too often touted itself as “the indispensable nation,” especially since the end of the Cold War. Even when U.S. allies do the hardest, most dangerous work, as they did during NATO’s 2011 intervention in Libya, U.S. leaders tend to declare that success could not have come without American support. It would be wiser for the United States to set its allies up to succeed and then give them the credit for their achievements. The Clinton administration’s support for Australia to lead a UN peacekeeping mission in East Timor in 1999 provides a good model. The intervention not only prevented massive bloodshed; it also emboldened Australia to take on a more active regional role, which was very much in the United States’ interest. Allies, of course, will not necessarily act exactly as Washington would like—they may lack the capabilities or pursue slightly different interests. But allowing like-minded states to take the lead will conserve U.S. resources and nurture more responsible allies.

The United States should also stop fetishizing its military. When military service was a common experience, Americans understood that they could have

a strong, capable force and still treat members of the military as regular citizens. Today, 46 years after the introduction of an all-volunteer service, civilians placate their consciences with token displays of respect—addressing military officers as “Sir,” referring to all service members as heroes, and letting them be the first to board airplanes. This reverence has a cost. When politicians venerate military leaders, as Trump has often done, they endanger healthy civil-military relations. Outsize military salaries are crowding out the operational and equipment investments that keep soldiers alive in combat. But no member of Congress wants to “vote against the troops.” More and more funding flows to the Department of Defense, while other essential pillars of foreign policy are neglected, with the consequence that the military now carries out many traditionally civilian tasks simply because it has the resources to accomplish them.

For the diplomatic arm of the government to regain its former strength, the State Department will need a major overhaul. At the moment, it is radically understaffed—by a factor of around four. It spends too little on training its work force, and most of the money is spent on language classes taught on a private campus in Washington. Instead, it could recruit those who already speak the necessary languages and specialize in the associated countries or permit diplomats to learn languages in residence at universities all across the country, thus allowing the Foreign Service to grow more connected to U.S. society. Imagine, too, what would be possible with diplomatic programs modeled on Teach for America or the GI Bill. Forgiving student loans for young U.S.

citizens who choose to spend two years serving their country abroad could create countless short-term recruits for diplomatic service and prepare others for careers in international business. Some argue that no amount of money or people could make the State Department as proficient as the Defense Department. That is a testable proposition. Run the experiment for a decade and see, because the militarization of U.S. foreign policy has come at a steep cost in lives and reputation.

Finally, strengthening U.S. diplomacy requires a new look at foreign aid. At the very least, dedicating some three-quarters of total foreign military assistance to Egypt and Israel, as the United States has done in recent years, seems anachronistic—especially when Israel and many of its Arab neighbors have found common cause in opposing Iran and no longer need Washington to prop up the peace with massive amounts of military aid. Washington should shift the bulk of those funds to expand the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which ties assistance to progress on specific governance objectives, such as improving access to health care and women's access to education, with the aim of making countries more self-sustaining over time.

OPENNESS RETURNS

Trump has cast his transactional, "America first" approach as a response to public demands. But support for many of his trademark views is plummeting. According to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs' annual public opinion poll, which was first taken in 2004, record numbers of Americans view trade favorably. As of 2018, 82 percent of respondents agreed that trade ben-

efits the economy (up from just 59 percent in 2016). Eighty-five percent agreed it benefits consumers (compared with 70 percent in 2016), and 67 percent agreed that it is good for job creation in the United States (40 percent thought so in 2016). Congress has also pushed back on some of Trump's shallow nationalism: a bill in the House of Representatives denying the government funds to withdraw the United States from NATO passed by 357 to 22, and Trump was forced to issue his first veto after both houses of Congress voted to condemn his plan to shift military funds to the construction of a wall on the U.S.-Mexican border.

Still, opposition to the president's erratic policies is not the same as crafting a sustainable foreign policy in the aftermath of his term. Washington doesn't need to reinvent the wheel, but it does need to improve on the things that have worked in the past. Although challengers to the existing order pose dangers, returning to the tried-and-tested principles of U.S. foreign policy provides the most promising and cost-effective approach to managing those threats. The first step down this path is to stop characterizing the United States as hopelessly overburdened and outmaneuvered—and recognize that the United States still possesses the strengths that allowed it to become the world's most powerful country in the first place. ●

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