Trump's Lucky Year

Why the Chaos Can't Last

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When Donald Trump became president of the United States, many wondered just how abnormal his administration, and particularly his foreign policy, would be. After all, as a candidate, Trump had evinced a partiality for foreign strongmen, derided U.S. allies as a gang of freeloaders, proposed banning Muslims from entering the United States, sneered at Mexicans, and denounced free-trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement and the nascent Trans-Pacific Partnership, while demonstrating little understanding of most other dimensions of international politics. Scores of former senior Republican foreign policy officials, myself included, repudiated his candidacy on the grounds of both his character and his bent toward populist isolationism. His inaugural address confirmed fears that he viewed the world in darkly narrow, zero-sum terms. "We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has dissipated over the horizon," he said. He went on: "From this day forward, it's going to be only America first. America first."

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Being in office has done little to moderate Trump's belligerent rhetoric, improve his commitment to facts, or alter his views on trade and international agreements. Over the course of 2017, he insulted foreign leaders on Twitter, openly undermined his secretary of state, and attacked the FBI and the CIA. He continued to praise dictators, such as Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, and refused to mention Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty—which enshrines the idea that an attack against one NATO member is an attack against all—when visiting NATO headquarters in Brussels. His subordinates gamely echoed the promise of "America first," assuring both the public and themselves that Trump's use of that phrase had nothing to do with Charles Lindbergh's isolationist and anti-Semitic America First Committee, founded in 1940.

Still, the world did not blow up. World War III did not break out. A case can be made that all things considered, Trump has ended up being a highly erratic, obnoxious version of the Republican normal. He has been strong on defense (he increased the Pentagon's budget, although not as significantly as it had hoped), willing to use force (he launched cruise missiles at Syria as punishment for its use of chemical weapons), and committed to allies (enthusiastically in the case of Israel and Japan, grudgingly in the case of the Europeans). Although he has been more of an economic nationalist than some might like, the thinking goes that he remains within the bounds of GOP tradition.

Yet this reassuringly non-apocalyptic foreign policy was a product of good

Adult supervision? Trump with Mattis and Kelly at the White House, October 2017

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fortune, not restraint, and of the resistance of subordinates rather than the boss' growth. Trump was remarkably lucky in 2017. He did not experience any external shocks and paid no visible price for alienating the United States' friends. But at the same time, no part of the world is conspicuously better off for his efforts. Instead, the preexisting fissures in the international system are either the same or getting worse; no U.S. adversary is noticeably weaker, and some are getting stronger; and the president's behavior has devalued the currency of the United States' reputation and credibility. Sooner or later, his luck will run out. And when it does, the true costs of the Trump presidency will become clear.

IT COULD HAVE BEEN WORSE

In some ways, 2017 demonstrated the sheer difficulty of reversing the massive postwar governmental consensus on U.S. foreign policy. To be sure, in its pronouncements, the Trump administration ostentatiously walked away from the promotion of human rights and the maintenance of world order as animating principles of U.S. foreign policy. Speaking at the UN, Trump himself identified the sovereignty, security, and prosperity of the American people as his sole objectives. But congressional mandates and the sheer inertia of previous policies got in the way of "America first." And so human rights violators were still sanctioned, the United States agreed to ship antitank missiles to Ukraine, and relations with Mexico were uneasily patched up. The executive branch predominates in foreign policy, but Congress set limits, particularly with regard to Russia, and the courts had their say, blocking Trump's attempt to rewrite U.S. immigration law by executive fiat.

In addition to the intrinsic limits on presidential power, there was the resistance of what some of Trump's supporters darkly call "the deep state." This is a misnomer: there is no U.S. equivalent of what the Turkish military was 30 years ago, or what the Pakistani military and intelligence service remain today. The United States does not even have what the British historian Ronald Robinson termed "the official mind," the suffocating convictions of a mandarin class of career professionals. But there is no doubt that career diplomats, intelligence officials, civil servants, and military leaders share a deeply rooted consensus about U.S. foreign policy and security. And this consensus unquestionably diverges from Trump's worldview in its support for free trade, U.S. alliances (particularly NATO), and the U.S.-led global order. Many of Trump's senior political appointees do not share his worldview. Moreover, the Trump administration has been one of the slowest on record to fill positions—candidates for less than 40 percent of the key roles had been confirmed by the end of 2017. (Trump had roughly 300 officials confirmed by the end of his first year in office, whereas, for example, U.S. President George W. Bush had nearly 500.) As a result, there has been plenty of room for officials to continue the policies they prefer rather than pursue those that might please the president.

The internal feuding and incompetence of some of Trump's staff have made the machinery of government even less responsive to the White House. Trump may have succeeded in real estate and entertainment, but he has no experience in bending vast and complex organizations to his will. The informal nature of his directives has practically invited passive resistance, such as when the service chiefs and his own secretary of defense politely ignored his tweet about banning transgender individuals from serving in the military. Trump has experienced the very limitations on his power that President Harry Truman anticipated for his successor, Dwight Eisenhower: "He'll sit here, and he'll say, 'Do this! Do that!' And nothing will happen. . . . He'll find it very frustrating."

Some have put their faith in the administration's "grownups"—Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and the three generals, John Kelly (White House chief of staff), James Mattis (secretary of defense), and H. R. McMaster (national security adviser). These officials, the argument goes, have placed their guiding and restraining hands on the shoulders of the impulsive and poorly read commander in chief. This argument has some merit. After all, Mattis genially talked Trump out of advocating torture by suggesting that he always got more out of prisoners by offering them beer and cigarettes—a mild but effective fib, given that generals do not usually interrogate jihadists. When the memoirs are finally written, we may learn of more disasters averted in this way. Of the grownups, Tillerson is the least important, his background as the reclusive CEO of ExxonMobil having turned out to be poor preparation for leading the State Department and explaining U.S. foreign policy to the American people. He also appears to have the least influence with Trump.

The benign junta, as it were, of Kelly, Mattis, and McMaster is a different matter: closer to the president and more visibly respected by him. But there are important differences among them.

McMaster has been the most visibly at odds with the president when it comes to Russia, but he also most overtly endorses Trump's view of international politics as a jungle. Kelly is clearly more sympathetic to Trump's views on immigration, the press, and congressional oversight than the others. And Mattis shoulders a unique burden: running the largest organization in the United States, which limits the time he can spend reining in his errant boss. Furthermore, because Mattis understands that he is the main barrier between Trump and a truly catastrophic military decision, he will likely hold his dissents in reserve. In other words, the generals may not always be inclined to curb Trump's worst instincts, for in some cases, they share them, albeit to a milder degree. And being human, they, too, can be distracted, exhausted, and outmaneuvered. They form at best a partial, and not necessarily a permanent, brake.

What is not known is what will happen if and when the president decides on a course of action that his advisers deem deeply dangerous but nonetheless legal. With over a century of drilled obedience to the commander in chief under their collective belt, the generals might not be willing to subvert decisions with which they disagree, as other wily political appointees have done in the past (the most important case being James Schlesinger's quiet maneuvering as secretary of defense to ensure that U.S. President Richard Nixon could not make any wild moves without his authorization). Nor is it clear how many of the grownups will stay beyond two years. McMaster and Tillerson could conceivably exit before the end of 2018, and their replacements would probably be even less likely to resist the president's impulses.

A YEAR OF TRUMP

For the Trump administration, 2017 was a year of adjusting, however haphazardly, to a world that many inside and outside the president's camp consider increasingly dangerous. There was no major crisis along the lines of the Bay of Pigs or 9/11, but enough disturbing events are in train.

Throughout Trump's first year in office, North Korea continued developing nuclear weapons and the intercontinental ballistic missiles it would need to carry them to the United States. Fiery rhetoric on both sides (including Trump's threats of "fire and fury") and heightened sanctions on Pyongyang did not bring the confrontation any closer to resolution. And through its rhetoric and continued military buildup, including in the South China Sea, China made clear that it would not act as the United States' sheriff in East Asia. Meanwhile, McMaster's insistence on the denuclearization of North Korea and his repeated talk of "preventive war" made peaceful and honorable accommodation seem further off than ever. In the coming year, the United States will face a choice: either war (by accident or plan) aimed at disarming or even overthrowing the North Korean regime or a humiliating abandonment of the reddest of redlines.

As the year unfolded, it became increasingly apparent just how actively Russia had intervened in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Allegations about the Trump team's possible connections to Moscow dominated the news, as federal prosecutors doggedly pursued senior campaign officials and even secured a plea bargain from Trump's dismissed national security adviser, Michael Flynn. Meanwhile, the president remained

remarkably cordial toward Russian President Vladimir Putin and apparently ordered no retaliation for Moscow's astonishing effort to disrupt U.S. politics and discredit the United States' democratic processes. Ultimately, Congress and the State Department overrode the White House to impose more sanctions on Russia. But the situation remains unstable: the antitank missiles that the United States sent to Ukraine will surely kill Russians, and Putin is unlikely to react well to that. And a Europe increasingly preoccupied with its own populist and secessionist movements presents more opportunities for Russian subversion.

In April, Trump hosted Chinese President Xi Jinping at his Florida resort, Mar-a-Lago, and in November, Xi reciprocated in Beijing. The state visits were successful in the sense of being cordial and theatrical, but Trump's National Security Strategy, released in December, still identifies China as one of the United States' major competitors, and the president continued complaining about China's trade surpluses and failure to rein in North Korea. The administration's consistent support for Japan, including its decision to increase sales of advanced weaponry to Tokyo, is unlikely to warm the relationship with China. Nor is its standoff with North Korea: Beijing's apprehension about what might happen on the Korean Peninsula, reflected in Chinese military aircraft patrolling close to South Korea and the quiet preparation of refugee camps near the North Korean border, suggests that a U.S.–North Korean conflict could expand into something much larger. In the meantime, China's steady acquisition of military power, its menacing posture toward Taiwan, and its use of economic aid and investment as a tool of geopolitics are accelerating. China's rise is, if anything, more disturbing than it was a year ago.

In the ongoing war against jihadists, the Trump administration scored a major success by completing the campaign to help Iraq eliminate the physical footprint of the Islamic State, or ISIS. Although Trump was quick to take credit—and his administration did indeed increase resources and lift restrictions on U.S. military commanders—at most his administration expanded and accelerated an effort launched by the Obama administration. At the end of the year, ISIS no longer held territory in Iraq, but this did not destroy the group any more than killing Osama bin Laden finished off al Qaeda. The contest with jihadists will go on well after the Trump presidency, and the administration has not articulated a clear strategy for success. Meanwhile, vast swaths of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, lie in ruins. Shiite militias are operating there and in other predominantly Sunni regions of the country. And in October, the Iraqi government seized the contested governorate of Kirkuk, a move that shocked and angered the United States' Kurdish allies.

Next door in Syria, the regime of Bashar al-Assad has won its war for survival thanks to assistance from Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia, while U.S.-backed rebels found themselves isolated and outgunned. Israel now faces an emboldened Hezbollah and the possibility of a more permanent Iranian military presence in Syria. Trump did improve relations with Egypt, but, reflecting Russia's new assertiveness in the Middle East, the Egyptian government is now buying Russian military hardware and allowing Russian military aircraft to deploy from

Egypt. For that matter, the Israeli prime minister spent more time in Moscow than he did in Washington in 2017. Trump inherited these predicaments from his predecessor, but he did not, and perhaps could not, turn them around.

In the Persian Gulf, Trump more firmly aligned the United States with Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states and against Iran. He signaled his desire to walk away from the Iran nuclear deal and showed little interest in the ferocious proxy war that the Arab states are waging in Yemen against Iran. The administration appears to be placing its bets on the new Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, an ambiguous figure who is promising to open opportunities for women and modernize his society while aggressively confronting Iran and shaking down wealthy members and associates of the royal family. The administration has been noticeably silent about such excesses, as well as about the de facto Saudi kidnapping of the Lebanese prime minister in November.

On trade, shortly after taking office, Trump decisively dropped the Trans-Pacific Partnership. (Large international economic arrangements led by China took its place.) More consequentially, he began renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement, which he had repeatedly threatened to abandon altogether. Even though Trump promised to replace multilateral trade agreements with bilateral ones, he has failed to follow through. Indeed, he denounced the free-trade agreement with South Korea even as the United States prepared to potentially wage war alongside that country. Taken together, these actions made the United States appear less committed to an open international trading order than China. And Trump's approach to trade will likely alienate old friends, such as Canada, and critical allies, such as South Korea.

Elsewhere, crises percolated, most notably in Venezuela, as a state of over 30 million people continued its decline into chaos. But in Latin America (with the exception of Mexico), as in other parts of the world, there was not so much friction as absence: the United States was simply not playing much of a role one way or another. And throughout his first year, Trump acquired a global reputation for being unreliable, temperamental, and deceitful. According to the Pew Research Center, 93 percent of Swedes polled said they had confidence in U.S. President Barack Obama, but only ten percent said they felt the same about Trump. Of course, this may say more about Sweden than the United States, but in Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom, the numbers were almost as bad. And foreign officials have begun talking openly about how, in the words of Chrystia Freeland, Canada's minister of foreign affairs, "our friend and ally has come to question the very worth of its mantle of global leadership." The costs of such a deterioration in U.S. standing are long term. They may not be visible yet, but they will come into the open in a moment of acute stress.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration has not solved any of the problems it inherited, nor does it appear to have any solutions in view. After denouncing excessive involvement abroad, it increased, not decreased, the deployment of forces to active war zones. In Afghanistan, for example, Trump raised the number of U.S. troops with no clear objective beyond

persistence. Other moves were dramatic but essentially meaningless. The administration's unilateral recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital was bemoaned by foreign policy experts, but there is no evidence that Abu Dhabi, Cairo, or Riyadh cared much about it. At most, it was a minor pinprick to an Israeli-Palestinian peace process that had flatlined years before.

TROUBLE AHEAD

If Trump's first year was unnerving but largely uneventful, there is reason to think his second will be considerably more difficult. Not only are foreign policy challenges beginning to pile up; a year of the Trump administration has left the United States in a worse position to handle them.

The conflict with North Korea is moving toward some kind of climax. It is entirely plausible that Kim Jong Un, the country's supreme leader, will order the test of a nuclear-armed ballistic missile in 2018. In response, the United States might shoot down a test missile, even if it is unarmed. Such a move, or some minor incident in territorial waters or along the demilitarized zone, could degenerate into a devastating war. One hundred years after the end of World War I, it is wise to remember that small violent events can trigger much, much larger ones. The United States, having declared that it will not accept a nuclear-armed North Korea, might very well use force to make its word good. The public statements of Trump and McMaster do not indicate any interest in a strategy of containment and pressure over the long term. Even the more cautious Mattis has spoken of "storm clouds" gathering over the Korean Peninsula. One way or another, this crisis will come to a head by the beginning of 2019. It may end with a body blow to U.S. prestige and reputation, as Washington accepts what it has declared to be an unacceptable danger. Or it could devolve into a war that kills hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people.

Conflict with Russia has also become more likely. The curious tension between the president's sympathetic rhetoric and his administration's more hostile actions has increased the risk that a contemptuous and irritated Russia will poke back in eastern Europe. The Kremlin's anxieties about legitimacy in the midst of economic stagnation exacerbate the situation. At the same time, the United States could find itself in fights with Iran and in a more adverse relationship with China.

The combination of these and other tensions, and not just each individually, constitutes a second source of worry. If any conflict goes hot, Washington's antagonists in other realms will exploit the opening. U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt could conceive and execute strategy against Japan and Germany simultaneously, but Trump is no Roosevelt, and the polarized United States of 2018 is not the unified United States of 1942. "One war at a time," as President Abraham Lincoln supposedly cautioned William Seward, his pugnacious secretary of state, who was keen for a fight with the United Kingdom. A United States preoccupied with combat on, say, the Korean Peninsula would probably be less aggressive in containing Russia in Europe. And if foreign leaders know one thing about the Trump administration, it is that it seems uniquely incapable of focusing.

The final source of instability for U.S. foreign policy in 2018 will be domestic.

Elections in November may cost the Republicans control of one or both houses of Congress. There are also likely to be major developments in the investigations led by former FBI Director Robert Mueller, now the special counsel looking into Russia's interference in the 2016 election and any possible links between the Trump campaign and Russia. These could be indictments of senior figures in the administration or Mueller's firing by Trump. Watergate took over two years from the break-in to President Richard Nixon's resignation. There may be no crime here and no resignation or impeachment, but the rhythm feels similar. Moreover, these elections and investigations are taking place against the backdrop of a polarized and angry electorate. The resulting turmoil will affect the conduct of foreign policy by giving antagonistic powers openings to take advantage of a country consumed with domestic scandals or by tempting a desperate president to look elsewhere for glory or distraction. Nixon launched a celebratory tour of the Middle East in June 1974, shortly before the House Judiciary Committee recommended his impeachment to the full House. Trump, who is, if nothing else, a masterly reality television showman, might choose to divert attention in a more dramatic fashion.

Trump appears to believe that he achieved great things during his first year in office and that his critics have been proved both vicious and wrong. In fact, he has demoralized the institutions of the U.S. government on which he depends. He has disappointed anyone, at home or abroad, who expected him to mature. He is exhausting his first group of appointees, and he does not have much of a backup bench. And perhaps worst of all, he thinks he knows what he is doing. He does not seem to realize that he has not faced any tests comparable to the 9/11 attacks or the 2008 recession, and there is no reason to believe that he has developed the knowledge or judgment to handle such a challenge when it does arise. What he attributes to genius, most observers correctly attribute to luck. And there is a good chance that 2018 will be the year his luck runs out.