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The Unexceptional Superpower: American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump

Hal Brands

Prediction is a perilous endeavour in international politics; world events often make fools of those who claim to foresee them.¹ It seems certain, though, that historians will someday view Donald Trump's presidency as an inflection point in the trajectory of American grand strategy and the US-led international system. To be sure, 'grand strategic' may not be the first phrase that comes to mind regarding Trump, whose indiscipline and outbursts, unfamiliarity with key issues and unexpected changes of course have led many observers to conclude that his foreign policy lacks any structure whatsoever.² Just under a year after Trump's inauguration, however, it has already become clear that Trump's presidency is freighted with grand-strategic significance.

In part, this is simply because grand-strategic decision-making is unavoidable, even for leaders who scarcely realise they are doing it. All leaders make choices about their country's geopolitical orientation and relationships; all leaders affect the image their nation presents on the international stage. All statesmen have some notion – however wise or foolish, consistent or contradictory – of how the world works and what type of actions will produce security and well-being; all statesmen must formulate policies to address critical challenges. These issues are all deeply grand strategic in

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nature, and are all inherent in governing. A president may not be interested in grand strategy, as Leon Trotsky might have said, but grand strategy will be interested in him.³

More important still, Trump took power at a critical moment in American foreign relations. For more than 70 years prior to his election, the United States had pursued a world-building project of great energy and ambition; for the quarter-century before 2016, America had done so on the basis of its remarkable post-Cold War primacy. Yet Trump entered office as the world was becoming progressively more difficult for the superpower and the international system it had constructed. The rise of China was increasingly testing America's economic and military predominance, just as other geopolitical threats and tumults – from sharpening great-power rivalry, to the return of authoritarian challenges to democracy, to the unfolding of catastrophic upheaval in the greater Middle East and beyond – were intensifying and multiplying.⁴ There were, additionally, signs of mounting world-weariness at home, evoking questions about whether Washington would continue to play its long-standing role abroad.⁵ Thus, in the run-up to November 2016, it seemed likely that once Hillary Clinton – a reliably internationalist candidate – was elected president, her principal grand-strategic challenge would be bolstering American primacy and fortifying the US-centric global order.

It was Trump who triumphed, however, causing events to take a different course. Trump came to Washington promising a grand-strategic revolution – the deconstruction of America's multi-generational project to shape a stable, open world. So far, the president's statecraft has proved somewhat less radical than his rhetoric portended. He has not simply pulled up the drawbridge to Fortress America; he has been drawn instead toward more moderate stances on several key issues. And yet it would be wrong to conclude that Trump has simply been tamed by the system, because he has nonetheless left his own distinctive, and largely destructive, mark on US strategy.⁶ Rather than using his nationalist credentials constructively, to strengthen America's engagement with the international system it created, Trump has, in words and deeds alike, seemed to take dead aim at many of the core ideas and practices that have made Washington such an effective – indeed, exceptional – global leader. The president surely believes that

his policies will maximise American wealth, power and independence in a remorselessly competitive global arena. In practice, however, Trump's initiatives and mannerisms are serving primarily to diminish the American superpower, and to intensify the stresses on a system that has served Washington and so many others so well for so long.

The sources of US dominance

For four generations, America has led an international order that has been admirably peaceful, prosperous and democratic, at least compared to other international orders the world has known. Its success in doing so can be attributed to the country's unequalled hard power, and the distinctive manner in which Washington has employed that might.

From a hard-power perspective, America had been primed to lead since the Second World War, if not before. Even during the Cold War competition with Moscow, the world was never truly bipolar. America dramatically outstripped the Soviet Union in economic prowess, and it possessed overall military superiority despite Moscow's conventional advantage in Central Europe.⁷ After the Cold War, US primacy reached new heights. America commanded global power-projection capabilities likely greater than those of the rest of the world combined, and its economy accounted for a quarter of global GDP. 'Nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power; nothing', Paul Kennedy marvelled in 2002.⁸ Even today, as intensifying geopolitical and geo-economic competition cuts into the US lead, Washington remains far and away the world's pre-eminent power. Leadership rests primarily on material capability, and America's vast economic and military advantages have represented the hard-power pillars of its global role.

Yet America's run as a superpower has also depended on how those strengths were wielded. Washington might have elected, after the Second World War, to pursue a narrow conception of its own interests, or even to use its power coercively, to extract maximum unilateral advantage from its various relationships. Instead, driven by the searing memory of war and depression, American policymakers worked to transform the international environment by fashioning institutions and arrangements meant to benefit not just the United States but also like-minded countries around the world.

By anchoring military alliances that delivered security in key regions, emphasising international as well as national prosperity, and providing public goods such as freedom of the seas and leadership in addressing global challenges, the United States strove to create a flourishing world in which America itself could flourish.⁹

To stress this preoccupation with ‘global order’ is not, as one critic asserts, to indulge in ‘teary-eyed nostalgia as cover for US hegemony’, much less to obscure how ruthlessly self-interested US policy could be.¹⁰ After all, America would never have sustained this strategy for so long had it not benefited handsomely – in the form of economic prosperity, diplomatic and military influence, and other gains – from the endeavour. ‘America First?’, one European diplomat said of Trump’s campaign slogan in early 2017: ‘We’ve all been marching to your tune for 70 years.’¹¹ And as inhabitants of countries from Vietnam to Nicaragua can attest, US officials were hardly averse to practising the dark arts of violence and intimidation in dealing with challenges to the system they sought to erect.

The point, rather, is simply that, by the often tragic standards of world affairs, America exercised its power in a comparatively consensual and benevolent fashion; it behaved less exploitatively than it might have; and it permitted and even encouraged the well-being of those who accepted the US concept of international order. Indeed, this approach powerfully differentiated America from the Soviet Union during the Cold War and made US pre-eminence relatively palatable for many global actors. It has long ensured that most US partners have feared American withdrawal more than American hegemony.¹²

The style of US leadership has mattered greatly in other respects as well. Since 1945, international security has rested heavily on the credibility of American commitments; US officials have thus sought to demonstrate that Washington is a reliable and competent actor, one that can carry out complex tasks effectively and serve as a source of stability in a dangerous world.¹³ Numerous presidents have encouraged – with decidedly imperfect consistency – the spread of democracy and human rights, in the belief that America’s moral leadership is integral to its geopolitical leadership and that the country will be safer and stronger in a more liberal world. There

was a 'truly profound connection' between democracy and security, George Shultz once commented. 'It is no accident ... that America's closest and most lasting relationships are its alliances with its fellow democracies.'¹⁴ Similarly, Washington has forged bonds of deep, institutionalised collaboration with its closest partners, on grounds that common geopolitical interests and political values justified going beyond purely transactional ties and forming an enduring strategic community.

Finally, US influence has derived not solely from America's material might, but from its image as an attractive, if flawed, society worthy of esteem and emulation. Enviable soft power has been a force multiplier for US hard power.¹⁵ These qualities have sometimes been more honoured in the breach than the observance, of course – Iraq, Vietnam and segregation are as central to American history as are the Marshall Plan and NATO. And by no means has US policy been without its frustrations, failures and flaws. But all of these qualities have been broadly vital to post-war American strategy, and all are being challenged today.

Tradition, disruption and Donald Trump

In many ways this is unsurprising, given the views Trump has long espoused. If Dean Acheson was 'present at the creation' of the American-led system, Trump's campaign rhetoric frequently lent the impression that he intended to be present at the destruction. Trump's geopolitical heresies were legion, from his denigration of US alliances, to his advocacy of protectionism and trade wars, to his disdain for democracy promotion and unembarrassed admiration for authoritarians such as Vladimir Putin. He trafficked in an often xenophobic nationalism; he pledged to restore torture and to order the military to commit war crimes in the struggle against terrorism. No less striking was the core intellectual impulse driving these critiques – that America had actually betrayed its own well-being by embracing economic interdependence, providing global public goods and assuming unprecedented international burdens. The post-war foreign-policy tradition, Trump argued, was not an expression of higher self-interest. It was a naive giveaway that enriched an ungrateful world at America's expense.¹⁶

These ideas were sufficiently radical that they provoked an unprecedented revolt by Republican foreign-policy experts, while leaving many observers to wonder whether Trump really meant what he said. Yet as Thomas Wright has noted, Trump's bedrock views on international affairs – particularly his belief that America has gotten a bum deal from the world – have remained stable for decades.¹⁷ The attacks Trump launched against allegedly parasitic allies and trade partners such as Japan and Kuwait in the 1980s were essentially those he levelled against Germany and Mexico in 2015–16. It seems prudent, then, to assume that the ideas Trump espoused during the campaign represented his true convictions.

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Nonetheless, there were always reasons to think that Trump's conduct in office might be somewhat less revolutionary than his rhetoric foretold. The president was sure to face resistance from a Congress and professional bureaucracy that remained deeply internationalist, and many of his proposals – tearing up the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), for instance – would actually harm his political base if implemented. Moreover, Trump's views on foreign affairs were strongly held but often poorly informed, raising the possibility that his position might change as he learned more. There was also no escaping the fact that drastic change is difficult – that displacing policies and institutions deeply embedded in American practice invariably proves harder than presidents expect. Not least, the unorthodoxy of Trump's views made it inherently difficult to staff an administration with true-believing 'America Firsters', and made it likely he would appoint somewhat more moderate officials – as indeed he did, by naming individuals such as James Mattis, John Kelly, H.R. McMaster, Nikki Haley and Gary Cohn to key positions.

There have, consequently, been several respects in which candidate Trump's bark proved to be worse than President Trump's bite. Trump has not – so far – reinstated torture or directed the killing of suspected terrorists' families, nor has he ordered indiscriminate aerial attacks against the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL). He has not slapped 45% industrial tariffs on Beijing or declared China a currency manipulator; and he has not with-

drawn US forces from Europe or consummated a diplomatic rapprochement with Russia. After much deliberation, Trump neither ordered a withdrawal from Afghanistan nor turned that mission over to mercenaries, choosing instead to modestly increase troop levels in a war he had previously derided as pointless.¹⁸ Nor has Trump begun construction of a great wall along the US–Mexico border or imposed sanctions to force Mexico to pay for it.¹⁹ Some of these things could easily change, but to date Trump’s conduct has been more restrained than many observers might have predicted.

On other issues, too, Trump’s policy has remained fairly close to the mainstream. Despite a deeply problematic stance toward NATO, Trump has continued augmenting US military capabilities in Europe.²⁰ On counter-terrorism, he has adopted – while incrementally intensifying – Obama’s medium-footprint approach to defeating ISIS and other jihadist groups.²¹ Perhaps most notably, although Trump had previously advocated making Syria’s Bashar al-Assad a partner in the ‘war on terror’, as president he ordered a cruise-missile strike against Assad’s forces after the Syrian regime carried out a horrific chemical-weapons attack against civilians in April 2017 – thereby vindicating president Obama’s red line from five years prior.²² These shifts were largely welcomed by the bipartisan foreign-policy elite, and they were mirrored by internal staffing shake-ups, as some of the America First firebrands that had been advising Trump – Steve Bannon, most notably – were fired or marginalised over the course of 2017.

Some observers have therefore argued that Trump has adopted ‘a fairly familiar Republican approach to foreign policy’, and that his statecraft has been largely constructive and sober.²³ This, unfortunately, goes too far. For one thing, Trump has frequently *tried* to enact sharper and sometimes more dangerous policy departures, and has simply been prevented or, at the last minute, dissuaded from doing so. Trump did seek to lift sanctions and undertake a diplomatic rapprochement with Russia, but was checked by fierce resistance from the State Department bureaucracy and Congress.²⁴ The White House did reportedly draft an executive order laying the groundwork for the return of torture and CIA ‘black sites’, only to be blocked once again by internal opposition.²⁵ Trump nearly terminated NAFTA in April 2017 (and may still do so), but pulled back after key advisers unified against

the proposal.²⁶ Finally, Trump did apparently seek a tacit reconciliation with Assad in early 2017, by dropping the previous US insistence that he leave office, only to execute a U-turn when Assad apparently interpreted this policy shift as a green light for chemical attacks.²⁷

Trump, in other words, has often sought to act in just the fashion he advertised on the campaign trail. Insofar as he has moved toward the mainstream, he has often been dragged there unwillingly. This, in turn, points to a more fundamental issue. Trump may not have pursued the wholesale deconstruction of US foreign policy, but by no means has he simply accepted the conventions of post-war statecraft. Rather, the president has shaped his administration as much as his administration has shaped him; he has undertaken a number of innovations that are proving quite disruptive.

Zero-sum world

Consider, firstly, how Trump has reframed the basic US view of world order. The commitment to building a broadly beneficial, positive-sum system has been a defining theme of US statecraft since the Second World War, and has served to generate considerable international legitimacy for Washington. It is this very project, however, that President Trump has scorned and sought to revise. Indeed, the central organising principle of Trump's statecraft has been the idea that America is systematically exploited as a result of the arrangements – free-trade pacts, alliances, international organisations – it has constructed, and that the country will only become prosperous and powerful again if it accepts that global affairs are fundamentally a zero-sum game.

Trump's inaugural address was zero-sum at its core, a paean to a narrowly exclusive view of national self-interest. 'We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon', he declared; a more ruthless ethos was required for America to start 'winning again, winning like never before'.²⁸ The president expressed similar views in his address to the United Nations in September 2017, complaining that America had too often received 'nothing in return' from other nations that 'gamed the system'.²⁹ In this and other speeches, Trump emphasised a return to nationalism and sovereignty as indispensa-

ble bulwarks against the depredations of a hostile world, in sharp contrast to the allegedly pernicious internationalism and openness of America's post-war project. 'The nation-state remains the true foundation for happiness and harmony', Trump has repeatedly declared, while warning that the 'false song of globalism' will lead America to ruin.³⁰

This perspective suffused the most explicit statement of the administration's worldview to date: the *Wall Street Journal* op-ed published by McMaster and Cohn in May 2017, in which the authors contend that

The world is not a 'global community' but an arena in which nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage. We bring to this forum unmatched military, political, economic, cultural and moral strength. Rather than deny this elemental nature of international affairs, we embrace it.³¹

The language here was telling. In a community, mutually beneficial outcomes are possible. In an arena, there are only winners and losers.

These ideas have driven Trump's approach to numerous issues, most notably foreign-economic policy. Whereas recent administrations broadly sought to deepen the international trade regime, Trump is taking a more mercantilist approach. He has instituted some protectionist measures – against Canadian aeroplanes and softwood lumber, for instance – and begun positioning the administration to do likewise in other cases.³² The Trump White House has been consistently hostile to the World Trade Organization, and insisted on removing anti-protectionist language from statements issued by the G20.³³ The president has flirted with imposing high tariffs on steel from countries such as China, South Korea, Japan and Germany – potentially the opening shot in a trade war – and several times threatened to terminate agreements such as NAFTA and the US–South Korea free-trade pact (KORUS).³⁴ Throughout, Trump has shown an abiding preoccupation with bilateral trade deficits, seemingly insisting that America run surpluses with all its major trade partners simultaneously.

Not all of these measures are unprecedented in recent history; previous administrations sometimes imposed targeted sanctions to generate leverage

in ongoing trade negotiations. For Trump, however, these measures are all informed not by a desire to strengthen or deepen an international trade system that has delivered so much prosperity for America and the world, but by a desire to fortify US economic sovereignty and freedom of action at the expense of that system. To drive home the point, Trump withdrew from two major international agreements of the Obama era – the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Paris climate-change accords – because these deals allegedly privileged the interests of others to the detriment of American prosperity and economic independence. The president prioritises, as he put it, the interests of ‘Pittsburgh, not Paris’, and he often frames those interests as conflicting, not complementary.³⁵ Foreign policy is not missionary work, as Henry Kissinger might have said, and any president would agree that America must look out for itself. What Trump has done, however, is to pit his strident nationalism *against* the American internationalist tradition.

Ambivalent ally

In doing so, Trump is challenging a second tenet of US statecraft: the idea that there is a group of like-minded nations to which America is bound by more than a transitory alignment of interests. Lord Palmerston famously remarked that countries have no eternal allies and no perpetual enemies, only eternal and perpetual interests. Since the Second World War, however, Washington *has* had eternal and perpetual allies: the (mostly) democratic nations of the ‘free world’ that constitute the core of US alliance structures in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region.

These nations have been tied to America by what Acheson called ‘a common faith’ in democratic values and a broadly shared vision of international order, bonds that have been reinforced by decades of institutionalised collaboration in addressing the world’s greatest security challenges.³⁶ US leadership of this bloc has therefore ensured that Washington can muster a vast overbalance of power on key issues of global order.³⁷ Trump, however, has often behaved in ways that seem almost calculated to sunder the ties between America and its closest partners.

Trump has berated NATO allies for alleged free-riding, telling Paris that America ‘wants [its] money back’ and demanding that Berlin cough up ‘vast

sums of money'.³⁸ He has chastised allies at their most difficult moments – following terrorist attacks in the United Kingdom, for instance – and declared that he trusts Germany's Angela Merkel no more than Russia's Vladimir Putin.³⁹ In fact, Trump has more energetically criticised the European allies than the country – Russia – that most threatens them, and he initially pursued a rapprochement with Putin absent any apparent coordination with NATO. Not least, Trump has talked down America's defence commitments by deliberately refusing to endorse America's Article V guarantee to NATO during his first European visit (in addition to behaving in a generally abrasive manner throughout the trip).⁴⁰ Trump's aides have insisted that this is all 'tough love' designed to elicit better burden-sharing, and the administration – led by Secretary of Defense Mattis – has continued NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence programme and the European Reassurance Initiative.⁴¹ Yet the decidedly un-reassuring fact remains that America's president has shown more animosity than amity toward America's oldest partners.⁴²

Other allies have suffered similar treatment. Amid a worsening nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula, Trump has repeatedly attacked allied South Korea by inveighing against the KORUS agreement, demanding that Seoul offer greater payments for US protection and lambasting President Moon Jae-in for 'appeasement' of Pyongyang.⁴³ Trump has also taken a cavalier attitude toward the prospect of a war that could devastate South Korea, on grounds that 'if thousands die, they're going to die over there'.⁴⁴ Washington has historically taken pains to reassure allies of US support and reliability; Trump seems to be doing just the opposite.

This conduct flows from two core premises of Trump's worldview: firstly, that US alliances are bad deals because Washington bears the costs and risks while allies reap the benefits; and secondly, that America should therefore take a more transactional, ad hoc approach to relationships even with its closest friends. These ideas are seriously flawed. Scholarship demonstrates that the cost-benefit assessment of US alliances is strongly positive, even if some free-riding does inevitably occur, and that the highly institutionalised nature of those alliances produces much of their utility.⁴⁵ Yet these concepts have nonetheless permeated official thinking. 'Simply put, America will treat others as they treat us', wrote McMaster and Cohn.

'Where our interests align, we are open to working together to solve problems and explore opportunities.'⁴⁶

This innocuous-sounding statement is, one imagines, actually quite ominous for America's allies, for it implies that special, enduring relationships are passé – that goodwill or past cooperation cannot be banked with Trump's America, and that transactional dealings on the basis of temporarily convergent interests are the new order of things. America has benefited greatly from leading a strategic community bound together with hoops of steel, but Trump often acts as though Washington desires no permanent friends.

Power and purpose

Trump is simultaneously undermining the free world in another way, by diminishing America's role as global champion of democracy and human rights. The belief that America should act in this capacity – which has influenced policy for generations and been particularly strong since the 1970s – is not merely ideological zealotry.⁴⁷ Rather, America's commitment to promoting democratic ideals has helped it amass tremendous power with comparatively little global resistance, and endowed Washington with moral appeal that neither Moscow nor any other authoritarian rival could match. Likewise, America's active support for human rights and political reform played a contributing – if hardly all-determining – role in the dramatic democratic gains of the 1970s and after, thereby rendering the international environment more favourable to US interests and ideals.⁴⁸ Excessive evangelism can be dangerous, of course, and US presidents have not always steered clear of that danger. On the whole, though, a foreign policy attentive to the spread of freedom has paid strategic dividends.

Trump has distanced himself from this heritage. He has argued that America lacks the competence to promote democracy abroad, and framed values-based priorities as distractions from the real business of advancing US security and prosperity. He has also evinced undisguised admiration for authoritarians, and claimed that a society as flawed as the United States' has no business meddling in the affairs of others.⁴⁹ The upshot has been a presidency in which issues of human rights and democracy are more marginalised than at any time in decades.

Even as mundane a thing as Trump's body language has been telling in this respect. His dealings with dictators have often been as comfortable and fluid as his dealings with democratic leaders have been awkward and confrontational.⁵⁰ The president has refused to 'lecture' Arab regimes – or even authoritarian rivals Russia and China – on their political repression, but has eagerly chided Germany and other democratic allies for their supposed failings.⁵¹ Likewise, Trump has praised backsliding democracies for blatantly illiberal behaviour, commending Rodrigo Duterte for his campaign of extrajudicial executions in the Philippines, for instance, and congratulating Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan for winning a rigged referendum in April 2017.⁵² And just as Trump has advocated a more transactional geopolitics, he has embraced a sort of amoral transactionalism – a willingness to cooperate with any regime, no matter how repressive – on issues such as counter-terrorism. 'We will make common cause with any nation that chooses to stand and fight alongside us against this global threat', Trump remarked.⁵³ Meanwhile, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson explicitly cast values issues as 'obstacles' to American statecraft in early remarks to US diplomats, while also downgrading human-rights initiatives and attempting to excise democracy promotion from his department's mission statement.⁵⁴

Admittedly, the president has criticised human-rights abuses by adversaries Venezuela, Iran, Syria and North Korea, but any broader or more systematic concern with these issues seems absent.⁵⁵ Trump's presidency thus features not just ambivalence regarding military nation building – an understandable sentiment in light of long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – but a greater scepticism about integrating American values into US statecraft.

This shift has been piercingly clear at the intellectual level. Speaking in Warsaw in July 2017, Trump did emphasise the role of values in a supposed civilisational clash between the West and radical Islam. Yet in doing so he implied that democratic values were the peculiar province of the West, rather than being, as his predecessors often argued, universal in nature. Moreover, although his speech was delivered in Poland, Trump declined to comment on either the undeniable authoritarian resurgence in

that country or the role of Russia in undermining democratic institutions in Europe and beyond.⁵⁶ At the United Nations in September, Trump disclaimed any intention to promote America's form of government abroad, and stressed the overriding importance of strengthening national sovereignty amid geopolitical turmoil. All states, he argued, must 'respect ... the rights of every other sovereign nation'.⁵⁷ Sovereignty is, of course, the crutch on which authoritarians lean to shield internal repression from external scrutiny; promoting liberal values sometimes requires subordinating issues of sovereignty to concerns of legitimacy.⁵⁸ Thus, Trump's speech – and policies – were surely pleasing to autocrats in the Middle East and elsewhere. They were just as surely disconcerting to those who believe the prudent promotion of political freedom remains an important US objective.

Dispensable nation

Trump's statecraft is simultaneously testing a fourth element of America's strategic tradition: the country's reputation for taking the helm in confronting key global threats and challenges, and its corresponding ability to reap the benefits that accompany that role. Make no mistake: Washington has *always* demanded special privileges and deference from its partners, on issues from intra-alliance diplomacy to international monetary relations.⁵⁹ But America's friends have tolerated these impositions because Washington has also borne special burdens. The United States has, for decades, been the first responder running *toward* the fire; it has organised and catalysed collective action in addressing critical global problems, from rebuilding Europe and creating a flourishing international economy after the Second World War to confronting aggressors such as Kim Il-sung, Saddam Hussein and the Islamic State. Under Trump, however, the 'indispensable nation' is becoming less indispensable, by absenting itself from the vanguard on several issues of global concern.

Globalisation is under fire as protectionist pressures surge, yet the message conveyed by Trump's withdrawal from the TPP and attacks on other free-trade agreements is that America is retreating from efforts to keep the international economy open. Climate change represents a stark long-

term threat to international security and prosperity, but by rejecting the Paris accords, Trump has effectively walked away from multilateral efforts to meet the challenge. Refugee flows constitute a grave humanitarian crisis and a growing peril to social and political stability in many countries, yet Trump is reducing the already small number of refugees America accepts, and seeking mainly to insulate the country from the problem.⁶⁰

To be sure, Trump has urged that the international community rally to confront the threats of greatest concern to his administration, namely terrorism, Iran and North Korea.⁶¹ But Trump has simultaneously exalted nationalism and sovereignty in a way that seems ill-suited to addressing key transnational challenges, and adopted a *sauve qui peut* attitude toward issues that matter greatly to many others.

This approach corresponds with Trump's belief that bearing the costs of global leadership is a losing proposition for America. But it risks rupturing the generations-old bargain between Washington and its partners, and so it is unsurprising that foreign leaders have registered their dismay and begun to adjust their policies accordingly. Merkel publicly 'deplored' the US withdrawal from Paris; even before that, she had called for Europeans 'to take our fate into our own hands'.⁶² Major trade initiatives excluding the United States – a rump TPP and an EU–Japan deal – have emerged or accelerated during the Trump era, and the remaining signatories intend to proceed on Paris without America.⁶³

Many hope that Japan, Germany and other allies will fill the leadership vacuum created by Trump. Unfortunately, more dangerous actors are also manoeuvring to do so. Since Trump's election, China's leaders have cast their nation as a responsible global leader on climate change, trade and other issues, in unsubtle contrast to US conduct. Beijing has taken on this greater role, according to one foreign-ministry official, 'because the original front-runners suddenly fell back and pushed China to the front'.⁶⁴ It is remarkable to see China – an illiberal, mercantilist nation whose increasingly revisionist behaviour represents perhaps the greatest long-term threat to the existing international order – styling itself as champion of the liberal, cooperative system America forged. Yet in such ways are global arrangements shifting under Trump.

Unsteady as she goes

Equally disruptive is a fifth aspect of Trump's presidency: his weakening of America's reputation for diplomatic steadiness and reliability. Past presidents occasionally embraced the idea of deliberately behaving erratically to discomfit adversaries, the classic – if mostly unsuccessful – example being Richard Nixon's 'madman strategy'.⁶⁵ By and large, though, US officials have understood that superpowers lack the luxury of being fundamentally unpredictable.

After all, the international order ultimately rests on the credibility of US commitments, and American leadership on its partners' belief that Washington will use its power responsibly and act as a source of global stability. This is precisely why international observers have been so dismayed by episodes such as the Iraq War, in which America has seemed to behave dangerously or erratically – or in which, to quote John Lewis Gaddis, 'great power was being wielded without great responsibility'.⁶⁶ Trump, however, has shown little interest in global order, and has often argued that unpredictability will enable America to better manipulate adversaries and allies alike.⁶⁷ And so, whether as a matter of strategy or his own combustible temperament, Trump has cultivated a reputation for just the volatility and unreliability that system leaders typically seek to avoid.

Trump's abandonment of the Paris accords and the TPP, two major multilateral agreements that Washington had spearheaded and prodded numerous others to join, has contributed mightily to this reputation. 'For America's friends and partners, ratifying [the TPP] is a litmus test for your credibility and seriousness of purpose', Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had commented; Trump's abrupt withdrawal presumably indicated that Washington had failed that test.⁶⁸ Likewise, by repeatedly threatening to end NAFTA and KORUS, Trump has injected uncertainty and no little animosity into these key relationships. In the Middle East, US officials touted the formation of an 'Arab NATO' to confront Iran and other threats, only for Trump to abruptly shift course by reportedly encouraging Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to provoke a showdown with Qatar, one of America's key partners in the region.⁶⁹ And, of course, Trump's evident ambivalence about NATO's Article V has unavoidably cast

doubt on his commitment to upholding America's most fundamental international obligations.

Indeed, Trump's tenure has raised disturbing questions about whether the US president – the most powerful person in the world – can be trusted to handle critical issues of war and peace. America now has a leader who has casually threatened to attack Venezuela.⁷⁰ He has also decertified and appeared bent on undermining the Iran nuclear deal that Washington and several other capitals spent years negotiating, despite a near-consensus that Iran is not violating the accord; despite fears that doing so could precipitate a new nuclear crisis in the Gulf; despite the availability of options that would allow Washington to better compete with Tehran without triggering such a crisis; and despite the fact that reneging on, or even simply weakening, the Iran agreement would surely further decrease any possibility of successful nuclear diplomacy with North Korea.⁷¹

Regarding North Korea itself, Trump has seemingly sought to match Kim Jong-un in threat and bluster. He has engaged in personal name-calling (despite his advisers' counsel not to do so), promised to 'totally destroy' the country with 'fire and fury', publicly contradicted aides who argue that diplomacy remains the preferred course, and casually drawn red lines – against the testing of a North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), for instance, and against even the mere issuance of further rhetorical threats from Pyongyang – that America probably cannot enforce at acceptable cost.⁷²

In fairness to Trump, in both cases he inherited serious problems – an imperfect Iran deal that did little to constrain Tehran's regional expansionism, and a rapidly maturing North Korean ICBM capability – and his policies have so far been less radical than his rhetoric. There was also the chance, as of this writing, that Trump's break with the Iran deal might yet prove more symbolic than substantive. Finally, there remained the possibility – albeit a seemingly remote one – that Trump's confrontational posture might sufficiently discombobulate America's adversaries to produce a breakthrough on one or both of these issues.⁷³

*He inherited
serious problems*

What seemed likelier, however, was that Trump's behaviour would produce a series of more problematic outcomes by fostering global perceptions that America is now fuelling rather than dampening instability, undermining confidence that the White House is capable of steering the country – and the world – through the military and diplomatic crises that inevitably mark any presidency, and perhaps even leading the United States into a trap in which it must choose between escalation and the humiliating acknowledgement that Trump has been making threats he cannot carry out. The former choice would risk potentially catastrophic consequences, particularly with respect to North Korea; the latter would seriously undercut the geopolitical credibility US leaders have long sought to build, and encourage greater uncertainty about which of America's many red lines are truly red. The Republican chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has said he worries Trump might put the country 'on the path to World War III', echoing the reported earlier statement of an allied official that 'Washington, D.C. is now the epicenter of instability in the world'.⁷⁴ Hyperbole aside, both statements are revealing commentaries on how America's hard-won reputation for steadiness and reliability is dissipating under Trump.

The competence gap

Perceptions of basic US competence in global affairs are also rapidly diminishing. 'For much of the postwar period', writes Stephen Walt in *Foreign Policy*, 'the United States benefitted greatly from an overarching aura of competence.'⁷⁵ US policy featured its share of bumbles, the mishandled occupation of Iraq being the most prominent recent example. In general, however, the country that successfully oversaw the Marshall Plan, the reunification of Germany and the Persian Gulf War, and that helped mitigate – if not entirely solve – seemingly intractable problems including the proliferation of nuclear weapons and Europe's propensity for catastrophic violence, earned a reputation for being able to handle itself capably. 'The leadership, determination, diplomatic skill, and military efficiency displayed by the US stunned many Japanese', American officials in Tokyo reported following the Persian Gulf War.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, the persistent diplomatic incompetence that has marked the Trump presidency is encouraging the opposite conclusion.

The first unforced error came before Trump was inaugurated, when he threatened to revisit America's long-standing One China policy in order to pressure Beijing, only to retreat after the Chinese responded by reportedly freezing the entire diplomatic relationship.⁷⁷ The administration then issued an executive order temporarily banning travel from several Muslim-majority countries. The policy was seriously flawed in its conception, because it seemed certain to undermine rather than advance the struggle against terrorism by alienating Muslims overseas. It was equally flawed in the execution, as a hasty drafting process produced chaos at American airports and made the affair a high-profile fiasco. (The same hasty process also invited repeated judicial interventions that forced the redrafting of the measure, vindicating one prominent critic's description of the episode as 'malevolence tempered by incompetence'.⁷⁸)

Then, in dealing with Syria in early 2017, the administration stumbled by abandoning – without gaining any apparent concession or even, apparently, anticipating the likely consequences – the 'Assad must go' policy, a departure that may have encouraged Assad to resume large-scale chemical-weapons attacks.⁷⁹ Whatever leverage the subsequent airstrikes against Assad's forces may have yielded was quickly dissipated by the administration's evident confusion regarding what strategic effects the strikes were meant to produce, whether they were a prelude to additional military action, and whether they represented a reversal of Trump's earlier positions on Syria and Assad.⁸⁰ It was therefore unsurprising that Tillerson's attempt to capitalise on the airstrikes by demanding that Putin's Russia cease aiding Assad failed.⁸¹

Trump's apparent decision to give Saudi Arabia and the UAE the green light to confront Qatar came only a few weeks later, a move that provoked a potentially dangerous crisis amid the counter-ISIS campaign, put the president publicly at odds with top advisers (notably Mattis and Tillerson) who had been working to defuse regional tensions, and had the predictable if undesired effect of pushing Doha closer to Tehran.⁸² Throughout this period, Trump repeatedly disrupted his administration's own coercive diplomacy toward North Korea as well, by haranguing not just Pyongyang but also Seoul, sending conflicting signals about US objectives and issuing ultimatums that Pyongyang was certain to ignore. Finally, the president's apparently

improvised threats of military action against Venezuela served mainly to wrong-foot regional critics of President Nicolás Maduro's government (and to distract attention from that government's own failings) by raising the prospect of unwanted US intervention.⁸³ Additional missteps might be added to this list, including rapid-fire shifts of rhetoric and policy on numerous issues, repeated instances in which Trump has publicly contradicted his secretary of state and other advisers, and even angry tweets about Iranian missile tests that did not occur.⁸⁴ Every administration stumbles, particularly during its first year, but Trump has done so repeatedly and across an array of issues.

The reasons for this are not difficult to discern. Trump took office with a long list of unrealistic policy proposals, meagre knowledge of many essential issues, an ingrained tendency to improvise and resist systematic policy development, and, not least, an unstable and often volcanic personality. These characteristics virtually ensured habitual errors, and were substantially reinforced by another factor: Trump's undisguised hostility toward a professional bureaucracy that has traditionally lent competence and expertise to American policy.

The president's erstwhile chief political adviser, Steve Bannon, promised early in 2017 that Trump would undertake the 'deconstruction of the administrative state'. Indeed, the president has frequently seemed to be at war with the executive branch.⁸⁵ He compared CIA officials to Nazis, proposed crippling budget cuts for the State Department, and left hundreds of high- and mid-level national-security posts unfilled through much of his first year. The White House repeatedly bypassed State and other departments on important policy issues, and Trump has even publicly accused the 'deep state' of subverting his presidency.⁸⁶ The upshot has been the striking demoralisation and marginalisation of America's policy professionals – a phenomenon that may well have negative long-term implications for US security, and one that is undoubtedly impairing the administration's ability to conduct competent statecraft today.⁸⁷

The soft-power deficit

These issues all relate to the final way in which Trump is jeopardising US influence: by depleting America's formidable soft power. The term refers

to several things: the esteem foreigners have for US culture, politics and society; the perception that America stands for something more than its own self-interest in global affairs; and the use of non-coercive tools to accomplish geopolitical objectives.⁸⁸ The United States has derived enormous advantages from each of these elements. Goodwill generated by the Marshall Plan and Peace Corps was a crucial weapon in the Cold War, and the power of America's democratic ideals has given Washington veritable ideological fifth columns in countries around the world. Indeed, the imperatives of soft power have sometimes pushed US leaders not simply to carry out good works abroad but to face the flaws of American society at home. Federal-government support for desegregation in the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, was understood to be a critical campaign in the Cold War propaganda struggle.⁸⁹ Yet Trump – despite episodically invoking America's moral example – has impaired US soft power in multiple ways.

The first way is by attacking the bureaucratic institutions through which America exerts non-military influence. Trump's first budget submission coupled a largely symbolic elevation of US hard power – a proposed 3% increase in military spending – with a painfully tangible denigration of US soft power – roughly 30% cuts for the State Department and US Agency for International Development. 'This is a hard-power budget', said Mick Mulvaney, director of the White House Office of Management and Budget. 'It is not a soft-power budget.'⁹⁰ If enacted, this proposal would have severely constrained the civilian activities – diplomacy, development, humanitarian assistance – that Pentagon officials have deemed critical to sustaining any gains by US forces in the counter-ISIS campaign, Afghanistan and other areas.⁹¹ Congressional leaders quickly made clear that Trump's budget was therefore 'dead on arrival', but White House disdain for soft-power tools was nonetheless evident.⁹²

Meanwhile, the president was tarnishing other aspects of American soft power. Trump's continuing appeals to bigotry and nativism; his evident dishonesty and contempt for democratic norms; the pervasive conflicts of interest and appearance of official corruption; the entire spectacle of the Trump presidency: these issues were already diminishing global esteem for America even *before* Trump refused forcefully and consistently to condemn

the white supremacists responsible for tragic violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017.⁹³ Likewise, if Thomas Jefferson wrote of paying ‘a decent respect to the opinions of mankind’, the administration’s pursuit of policies – such as its persistent efforts to restrict immigration and refugees from Muslim-majority countries – widely deemed offensive overseas, along with its flaunting of an America First agenda that, by definition, places everyone else second, hardly cast the country in a favourable global light. When the president’s own defense secretary says America must ‘get the power of inspiration back’, there is undoubtedly a soft-power problem at work.⁹⁴

Global polling reveals the extent of the problem. Just months into Trump’s presidency, America’s global favourability rating had dropped from 64% to 49%. Large global majorities described Trump as ‘intolerant’ (65%), ‘arrogant’ (75%) and ‘dangerous’ (62%); even the world’s leading dictators – Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin – had higher favourability ratings. ‘Confidence in the US president’s ability to do the right thing’, the Pew Research Center noted, ‘has plummeted back to levels ... similar to or lower than’ George W. Bush’s ratings after the invasion of Iraq.⁹⁵ Hard power is certainly indispensable in the rougher geopolitical environment now emerging. But one suspects the soft-power deficit Trump is creating will prove quite damaging.

The unexceptional superpower

Change is not an inherently bad thing in US foreign policy, and to assert that Trump’s statecraft is flawed is not to claim that America’s post-war performance has been flawless. Today, as at any point over the past 70 years, the United States must address difficult questions about how to optimise burden-sharing within alliances, how hard to press for the spread of democracy and human rights, and myriad other issues. And today, perhaps more so than at any time in a quarter-century, America faces the challenge of fortifying its own power and the international system that power underwrites amid growing geopolitical dangers. It was not inconceivable, then, that a somewhat sharper, more nationalistic approach to grand strategy could pay dividends in the current circumstances – that a foreign policy which deftly blended a clear commitment to preserving the post-war internation-

alist tradition, on the one hand, with a harder-edged approach to enhancing US power and interests, on the other, might actually shore up America's geopolitical position and thus bolster the system itself. This was, in some measure, the approach taken by Richard Nixon in the late 1960s and early 1970s – another time of great strain on American power and the international system – and there was some hopeful speculation following the 2016 election that Trump might attempt a similar feat.⁹⁶

Nearly a year into his presidency, unfortunately, Trump has shown few signs of any personal commitment to – or even an understanding of – the virtues of America's post-war grand strategy. He has shown fewer signs still of possessing the discipline and shrewdness necessary to productively interweave an appreciation of internationalism with his own stridently nationalist instincts. As a result, Trump has too often pursued policies that have undercut, rather than updated, the most productive characteristics of America's post-war engagement with the world. Trump may have been constrained from implementing an undiluted America First agenda; he has not simply demolished the pillars of US foreign policy or the post-war international order. But even so, it would be a profound mistake to think that the 'axis of adults' has triumphed, or that Trump has been thoroughly mainstreamed, given the many ways in which he has nonetheless been weakening those pillars.⁹⁷

Breathlessness should be avoided in considering the ramifications here: Trump's behaviour will not cause US power and leadership to collapse overnight. Nor does his presidency spell imminent doom for the system America has done so much to create. America's core alliances are sufficiently institutionalised that they will surely outlast Trump; likewise, the international trade system has sufficient resiliency and support from other leading members that it, too, can be reasonably expected to endure, even though it will come under far greater pressure. America's international image may recover once Trump departs the scene (as it did after George W. Bush's presidency), and the United States will retain, for many years to come, ample hard-power capacity to influence global affairs. The silver lining, then, is that America is simply too powerful, and the international order it has underwritten too robust and successful, for Trump to squander

this strategic inheritance entirely. The dark cloud, however, is that Trump can still cause real damage over the course of a four-year or perhaps eight-year presidency, and that the damage will only accumulate the longer this approach to foreign policy persists.

After all, actions have consequences, even for a superpower, and the consequences of Trump's actions are unlikely to be benign. If Washington no longer acts as leader of first resort in tackling transnational issues of global concern and global consequence, then those issues will become harder to resolve – and other countries will become less solicitous of American preferences in devising responses of their own. Consider, for instance, how actors

Allies may begin considering backup plans

from China to the EU have responded to Trump's presidency – and particularly his protectionist impulses – by accelerating the negotiation of regional and bilateral trade agreements that may well prove detrimental to the interests of American firms and exporters.⁹⁸ If the United States is seen as a less competent and reliable actor, then fewer countries will

be willing to run political or geopolitical risks at American behest. In this regard, the memory of the TPP, the Paris accords and perhaps, as seems increasingly likely, the Iran nuclear deal will be prominent in the minds of America's partners the next time US officials try to organise some difficult multilateral endeavour.⁹⁹ Moreover, if the United States ceases to advocate for democratic freedoms and human rights, those principles will surely be at a disadvantage in an increasingly competitive global ideological climate.¹⁰⁰

Likewise, if Trump tarnishes America's image as an estimable society that stands for universal values, he will diminish the moral prestige and unparalleled soft power that have traditionally facilitated the exercise of US hard power. Not least, if Washington derides and devalues its alliances in favour of a more transactional geopolitics, it may unnerve and enervate the strategic community of democracies that has so greatly augmented American influence over the decades, precisely as that community confronts worsening dangers. Front-line allies and partners may begin to doubt the strength of American commitment; accordingly, they may begin considering geopolitical backup plans or even exploring greater accommodation with the

countries – namely Russia and China – that threaten them. ‘Were I to be in office right now’, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, the former president of Estonia, has said, ‘the concern would be trying to [determine] what is exactly the [US] policy that we’re going to have to count on.’¹⁰¹

There are signs, in fact, that countries such as Vietnam are already recalibrating their statecraft in response to Trump’s rise, and strategic debates about how Australia should position itself between America and China are taking on new urgency.¹⁰² To be sure, most American allies and partners will, for the time being, simply keep their heads down and hope that US policy soon returns to normal. But geopolitical commitment is, in the end, a two-way street, and if America is persistently stand-offish toward its friends then that attitude will eventually be repaid in kind. In the meantime, the general uncertainty, ambivalence and volatility of US policy will certainly not contribute to stability in an era of intensified global competition. On numerous dimensions, then, Trump’s words and actions seem likely to exacerbate – rather than ameliorate – the geopolitical difficulties and strains of the present moment, and to weaken – rather than enhance – America’s effectiveness in global affairs. And although there are many aspects of Trump’s presidency that are encouraging this outcome, his zero-sum worldview has the potential to prove particularly damaging.

Great power can easily be seen as threatening, rather than reassuring, by other actors in the international system, and America still commands impressive hard-power advantages. It follows, then, that if Washington pursues policies rooted in the idea that international relations is a Hobbesian struggle for unilateral advantage, and that America can only thrive by being significantly less attentive to other countries’ interests, it will corrode its reputation as a comparatively benign superpower and take on the image of a more selfish, even dangerous, hegemon. That change, in turn, would undermine America’s long-standing effort to foster a global environment in which a degree of restraint, stability and cooperation prevails and incentives for unmitigated competition are dampened. Moreover, given that US leadership has long rested on the consent of friends and partners who view that leadership as less threatening than the probable alternatives, this change would likely occasion more global objections and even diplomatic

resistance to the use of US power.¹⁰³ As the authors of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance, perhaps the most candid statement of American geopolitical ambition, acknowledged, ‘We must account sufficiently for the interests of the advanced industrial nations to discourage them from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political and economic order.’¹⁰⁴ The durability of US pre-eminence, in other words, depends not just on how much power America possesses, but on how benign and broadly beneficial that pre-eminence is seen to be.

Herein lies the greatest and furthest-reaching peril of Trump’s foreign policy: that it will leave the American superpower looking far less exceptional than before. US policy may never have been particularly altruistic or self-effacing, as analysts such as Andrew Bacevich have rightly noted.¹⁰⁵ What *has* made the United States exceptional compared to many other great powers is something subtler but nonetheless crucial – its willingness to occasionally de-emphasise the pursuit of near-term, unilateral advantage so as to attain the higher self-interest of fostering an environment in which the well-being of so many others contributes to the well-being of America itself. In the age of Trump, unfortunately, the United States seems to be embracing a darker calculus, as it distances itself from some of the key ideas and policies that have enabled the country’s run as an ambitious and relatively effective superpower. Should this approach persist over time, one fears that the American superpower will appear more ordinary and perhaps menacing to much of the world – and be far less successful in advancing US interests.

Notes

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