

This Time Is Different

Why U.S. Foreign Policy Will Never Recover

By **Daniel W. Drezner** May/June 2019

Confidence man: Trump aboard Air Force One in Maryland, October 2018
PETE MAROVICH / THE NEW YORK TIMES / REDUX

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a foreign policy community in possession of great power must be in want of peace of mind. Climate change, the Middle East, terrorism, trade, nonproliferation—there is never a shortage of issues and areas for those who work in international relations to fret about. If you were to flip through the back issues of *Foreign Affairs*, you would find very few essays proclaiming that policymakers had permanently sorted out a problem. Even after the Cold War ended peacefully, these pages were full of heated debate about civilizations clashing.

It is therefore all too easy to dismiss the current angst over **U.S. President Donald Trump** [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/lists/2019-01-20/trumps-second-year>] as the latest hymn from the Church of Perpetual Worry. This is hardly the first time observers have questioned the viability of a U.S.-led global order. The peril to the West was never greater than when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik—until U.S. President Richard Nixon ended the Bretton Woods system. The oil shocks of the 1970s posed a grave threat to the liberal international order—but then came the explosion of the U.S. budget and trade deficits in the 1980s. The perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks seemed like an existential threat to the system—until the **2008 financial crisis** [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-08-13/forgotten-history-financial-crisis>]. Now there is Trump. It is worth asking, then, whether the current fretting is anything new. For decades, the sky has refused to fall.

But this time really is different. Just when many of the sources of American power are ebbing, many of the guardrails that have kept U.S. foreign policy on track have been worn down. It is tempting to pin this degradation on Trump and his retrograde foreign policy views, but the erosion predated him by a good long while. Shifts in the way Americans debate and conduct foreign policy will make it much more difficult to right the ship in the near future. Foreign policy discourse was the last preserve of bipartisanship, but political polarization has irradiated that marketplace of ideas. Although future presidents will try to restore the classical version of U.S. foreign policy, in all likelihood, it cannot be revived.

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The American foundations undergirding the **liberal international order** [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-06-14/myth-liberal-order>] are in grave danger, and it is no longer possible to take the pillars of that order for granted. Think of the current moment as a game of Jenga in which multiple pieces have been removed but the tower still stands. As a result, some observers have concluded that the structure remains sturdy. But in fact, it is lacking many important parts and, on closer inspection, is teetering ever so slightly. Like a Jenga tower, the order will continue to stand upright—right until the moment it collapses. Every effort should be made to preserve the liberal international order, but it is also time to start thinking about what might come after its end.

The gravity of the problem is dawning on some members of the foreign policy community. Progressives are debating among themselves whether and how they should promote liberal values abroad if they should return to power. Conservatives are agonizing over whether the populist moment represents a permanent shift in the way they should think about U.S. foreign policy. Neither camp is really grappling with the end of equilibrium, however. The question is not what U.S. foreign policy can do after Trump. The question is whether there is any viable grand strategy that can endure past an election cycle.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

In foreign policy, failures garner more attention than successes. During the Cold War, the “loss of China,” the rise of the Berlin Wall, the Vietnam War, the energy crisis, and the Iran hostage crisis all overshadowed the persistently effective grand strategy of containment. Only once the Soviet Union broke up peacefully was the United States’ Cold War foreign policy viewed as an overarching success. Since then, the wars in **Afghanistan** [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2019-03-01/negotiations-are-best-way-end-war-afghanistan>], Iraq, Libya, and Syria, along with the 2008 financial crisis and the rise of populism, have dominated the discussion. It is all too easy to conclude that the United States’ recent foreign policy has been an unmitigated disaster.

At the same time that all these negative developments were taking place, however, underlying trends were moving in a more U.S.-friendly direction. The number of interstate wars and civil wars was falling dramatically, as was every other metric of international violence. Democracy was spreading, liberating masses of people from tyranny. Globalization was accelerating, slashing extreme poverty. The United States could take a great deal of credit for these gains, because the liberal order it nurtured and expanded had laid the foundations for decades of relative peace and prosperity.

Washington made mistakes, of course, such as invading Iraq and forcing countries to remove restrictions on the flow of capital across their borders. As misguided as these errors were, and as much as they alienated allies in the moment, they did not permanently weaken the United States’ position in the world. U.S. soft power suffered in the short term but recovered quickly under the Obama administration. The United States still managed to attract allies, and in the case of the 2011 intervention in Libya, it was **NATO allies** [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2012-02-02/natos-victory-libya>] begging Washington to use force, not vice versa. Today, the United States has more treaty allies than any other country in the world—more, in fact, than any country ever.

The United States was able to weather the occasional misstep in large part because its dominance rested on such sturdy foundations. Its geographic blessings are ample: bountiful natural resources, two large oceans to the east and the west, and two valued partners to the north and the south. The country has been so powerful for so long that many of its capabilities seem to be fundamental constants of the universe rather than happenstance. The United States has had the most powerful military in the world since 1945, and its economy, as measured by purchasing power parity, became the biggest around 1870. Few people writing today about international affairs can remember a time when the United States was not the richest and most powerful country.

Obama at a meeting with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in the Oval Office, Washington, DC, May 2015

Kevin Lamarque / Reuters

Long-term hegemony only further embedded the United States’ advantage. In constructing the liberal international order, Washington created an array of multilateral institutions, from the UN Security Council to the **World Bank** [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-02-19/battle-plan-world-bank>], that privileged it and key allies. Having global rules of the game benefits everyone, but the content of those rules benefited the United States in particular. The Internet began as an outgrowth of a U.S. Department of Defense initiative, providing to the United States an outside role in its governance. **American higher education** [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-02-12/educate-liberate>] attracts the best of the best from across the world, as do Silicon Valley and Hollywood, adding billions of dollars to the U.S. economy. An immigrant culture has constantly replenished the country’s demographic strength, helping the United States avoid the aging problems that plague parts of Europe and the Pacific Rim.

The United States has also benefited greatly from its financial dominance. The U.S. dollar replaced the British pound sterling as the world’s reserve currency 75 years ago, giving the United States the deepest and most liquid capital markets on the globe and enhancing the reach and efficacy of its economic statecraft. In recent decades, Washington’s financial might has only grown. Even though the 2008 financial crisis began in the American housing market, the end result was that the United States became more, rather than less, central to global capital markets. U.S. capital markets proved to be deeper, more liquid, and better regulated than anyone else’s. And even though many economists once lost sleep over the country’s growing budget deficits, that has turned out to be a non-crisis. Many now argue that the U.S. economy has a higher tolerance for public debt than previously thought.

Diplomatically, all these endowments ensured that regardless of the issue at hand, the United States was always viewed as a reliable leader. Its dense and enduring network of alliances and partnerships signaled that the commitments Washington made were seen as credible. American hegemony bred resentment in some parts of the globe, but even great-power rivals trusted what the United States said in international negotiations.

At the same time as the international system cemented the United States’ structural power, the country’s domestic politics helped preserve a stable foreign policy. A key dynamic was the push and pull between different schools of thought. An equilibrium was maintained—between those who wanted the country to adopt a more interventionist posture and those who wanted to husband national power, between those who preferred multilateral approaches and those who preferred unilateral ones. When one camp overreached, others would seize on the mistake to call for a course correction. Advocates of restraint invoked the excesses of Iraq to push for retrenchment. Supporters of intervention pointed to the implosion of Syria to argue for a more robust posture.

Thanks to the separation of powers within the U.S. government, no one foreign policy camp could accrue too much influence. When the Nixon White House pursued a strictly realpolitik approach toward the Soviet Union, Congress forced human rights concerns onto the agenda. When the **Obama administration** [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-07-05/what-obama-gets-right>] was leery of sanctioning Iran’s central bank, congressional hawks forced it to take more aggressive action. Time and time again, U.S. foreign policy reverted to the mean. Overreaching was eventually followed by restraint. Buck-passing led to leading. The results of these crosscutting pressures were far from perfect, but they ensured that U.S. foreign policy did not deviate too far from the status quo. Past commitments remained credible into the future.

For decades, these dynamics, global and domestic, kept crises from becoming cataclysmic. U.S. foreign policy kept swinging back into equilibrium. So what has changed? Today, there is no more equilibrium, and the structural pillars of American power are starting to buckle.

THE NEW NORMAL

Despite the remarkable consistency of U.S. foreign policy, behind the scenes, some elements of American power were starting to decline. As measured by purchasing power parity, the United States stopped being the largest economy in the world a few years ago. Its command of the global commons has weakened as China’s and Russia’s asymmetric capabilities have improved. The accumulation of **“forever wars”** [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-12-17/can-congress-stop-forever-war>] and low-intensity conflicts has taxed the United States’ armed forces.

Outward consistency also masked the dysfunction that was afflicting the domestic checks on U.S. foreign policy. For starters, public opinion has ceased to act as a real constraint on decision-makers. Paradoxically, the very things that have ensured U.S. national security—geographic isolation and overwhelming power—have also led most Americans to not think about foreign policy, and rationally so. The trend began with the switch to an all-volunteer military, in 1973, which allowed most of the public to stop caring about vital questions of war and peace. The apathy has only grown since the end of the Cold War, and today, poll after poll reveals that Americans rarely, if ever, base their vote on foreign policy considerations.

The marketplace of ideas has broken down, too. The barriers to entry for harebrained foreign policy schemes have fallen away as Americans’ trust in experts has eroded. Today, the United States is in the midst of a debate about whether a wall along its southern border should be made of concrete, have see-through slats, or be solar-powered. The ability of experts to kill bad ideas isn’t what it used to be. The cognoscenti might believe that their informed opinions can steady the hands of successive administrations, but they are operating in hostile territory.

To be fair, the hostility to foreign policy experts is not without cause. The interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya were massive screwups. Despite what the experts predicted, globalization has not transformed China into a Jeffersonian democracy. The supposedly infallible advice enshrined in the Washington consensus ended up triggering multiple financial crises. Economists and foreign affairs advisers advocated austerity, despite the pain it caused the poor and the middle class, and consistently cried wolf about an increase in interest rates that has yet to come. No wonder both Barack Obama and Trump have taken such pleasure in bashing the Washington establishment.

U.S. and Afghan soliders in Paktika Province, Afghanistan, November 2012

Goran Tomasevic / REUTERS

Institutional checks on the president’s foreign policy prerogatives have also deteriorated—primarily because the other branches of government have voluntarily surrendered them. The passage of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930, which exacerbated the Great Depression, showed that Congress could not responsibly execute its constitutional responsibilities on trade. With the 1934 Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act, it delegated many of those powers to the president, marking the beginning of a sustained decline in congressional oversight. More recently, political polarization has rendered Congress a dysfunctional, petulant mess, encouraging successive administrations to enhance the powers of the executive branch. Nor has the judicial branch acted as much of an impediment. The Supreme Court has persistently deferred to the president on matters of national security, as it did in 2018 when it **ruled in favor** [<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/26/us/politics/supreme-court-trump-travel-ban.html>] of the Trump administration’s travel ban.

Foreign policy analysts largely celebrated this concentration of power in the executive branch, and prior to Trump, their logic seemed solid. They pointed to the public’s ignorance of and Congress’ **lack of interest in international relations** [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-08-13/unconstrained-presidency>]. As political gridlock and polarization took hold, elected Democrats and Republicans viewed foreign policy as merely a plaything for the next election. And so most foreign policy elites viewed the president as the last adult in the room.

What they failed to plan for was the election of a president who displays the emotional and intellectual maturity of a toddler. As a candidate, Trump gloried in beating up on foreign policy experts, asserting that he could get better results by relying on his gut. As president, he has governed mostly by tantrum. He has insulted and bullied U.S. allies. He has launched trade wars that have accomplished little beyond hurting the U.S. economy. He has said that he trusts **Russian President Vladimir Putin** [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2018-07-11/surprising-promise-trump-putin-summit>] more than his own intelligence briefers. His administration has withdrawn from an array of multilateral agreements and badmouthed the institutions that remain. The repeated attacks on the EU and NATO represent a bigger strategic mistake than the invasion of Iraq. In multiple instances, his handpicked foreign policy advisers have attempted to lock in decisions before the president can sabotage them with an impulsive tweet. Even when his administration has had the germ of a valid idea, Trump has executed the resulting policy shifts in the most ham-handed manner imaginable.

Trump and Putin at the Helsinki Summit in Finland, July 2018

Kevin Lamarque / Reuters

Most of these foreign policy moves have been controversial, counterproductive, and perfectly legal. The same steps that empowered the president to create foreign policy have permitted Trump to destroy what his predecessors spent decades preserving. The other branches of government endowed the White House with the foreign policy equivalent of a Ferrari; the current occupant has acted like a child playing with a toy car, convinced that he is operating in a land of make-believe.

After Trump, a new president will no doubt try to restore sanity to U.S. foreign policy. Surely, he or she will reverse the travel ban, halt the hostile rhetoric toward long-standing allies, and end the attacks on the world trading system. These patches will miss the deeper problem, however. Political polarization has eroded the notion that presidents need to govern from the center. Trump has eviscerated that idea. The odds are decent that a left-wing populist will replace the current president, and then an archconservative will need that president. The weak constraints on the executive branch will only make things worse. Congress has evinced little interest in playing a constructive role when it comes to foreign policy. The public is still checked out on world politics. The combination of worn-down guardrails and presidents emerging from the ends of the political spectrum may well whipsaw U.S. foreign policy between “America first” and a new Second International. The very concept of a consistent, durable grand strategy will not be sustainable.

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In that event, only the credulous will consider U.S. commitments credible. Alliances will fray, and other countries will find it easier to flout global norms. All the while, the scars of the Trump administration will linger. The vagaries of the current administration have already forced a mass exodus of senior diplomats from the **State Department** [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-03-27/lost-art-american-diplomacy>]. That human capital will be difficult to replace. For the past two years, the number of international students who have enrolled in U.S. university degree programs has fallen as nativism has grown louder. It will take a while to convince foreigners that this was a temporary spasm. After the Trump administration withdrew from the **Iran nuclear deal** [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2018-05-16/how-iran-will-determine-nuclear-deals-fate>], it forced SWIFT, the private-sector network that facilitates international financial transactions, to comply with unilateral U.S. sanctions against Iran, spurring China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom to create an alternative payment system. That means little right now, but in the long run, both U.S. allies and U.S. rivals will learn to avoid relying on the dollar.

Perhaps most important, the Trump administration has unilaterally surrendered the set of ideals that guided U.S. policymakers for decades. It is entirely proper to debate how much the United States should prioritize the promotion of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law across the world. What should be beyond debate, however, is that it is worthwhile to promote those values overseas and enshrine them at home. Trump’s ugly rhetoric makes a mockery of those values. Although a future president might sound better on these issues, both allies and rivals will remember the current moment. The seeds of doubt have been planted, and they will one day sprout.

The factors that give the United States an advantage in the international system—deep capital markets, liberal ideas, world-class higher education—have winner-take-all dynamics. Other actors will be reluctant to switch away from the dollar, Wall Street, democracy, and the Ivy League. These sectors can withstand a few hits. Excessive use of financial statecraft, alliances with overseas populists, or prolonged bouts of anti-immigrant hysteria, however, will force even close allies to start thinking about alternatives. The American advantage in these areas will go bankrupt much like Mike Campbell in *The Sun Also Rises* did: “gradually and then suddenly.” Right now, the United States’ Jenga tower is still standing. Remove a few more blocks, however, and the wobbling will become noticeable to the unaided eye.

What would collapse look like? The United States would remain a great power, of course, but it would be an ordinary and less rich one. On an increasing number of issues, U.S. preferences would carry minimal weight, as China and Europe coordinated on a different set of rules. Persistent domestic political polarization would encourage Middle Eastern allies, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, to line up with Republicans and European allies, such as Germany and the United Kingdom, to back Democrats. The continued absence of any coherent grand strategy would leave Latin America vulnerable to a new Great Game as other great powers vied for influence there. Demographic pressures would tax the United States, and the productivity slowdown would make those pressures even worse. Trade blocs would sap global economic growth; reduced interdependence would increase the likelihood of a great-power war. Climate change would be mitigated nationally rather than internationally, leaving almost everyone worse off.

WHAT, ME WORRY?

It would be delightful if, ten years from now, critics mocked this essay’s misplaced doom and gloom. The state of U.S. foreign policy seemed dire a decade ago, during the depths of the financial crisis and the war in Iraq. That turned out to be more of a blip than a trend. It remains quite possible now that Trump’s successor can repair the damage he has wreaked. And it is worth remembering that for all the flaws in the U.S. foreign policy machine, other great powers are hardly omnipotent. China’s and Russia’s foreign policy successes have been accompanied by blowback, from pushback against infrastructure projects in Asia to a hostile Ukraine, that will make it harder for those great powers to achieve their revisionist aims.

The trouble with “after Trump” narratives, however, is that the 45th president is as much a symptom of the ills plaguing U.S. foreign policy as he is a cause. Yes, Trump has made things much, much worse. But he also inherited a system tipped of the formal and informal checks on presidential power. That’s why the next president will need to do much more than superficial repairs. He or she will need to take the politically inconvenient step of encouraging greater congressional participation in foreign policy, even if the opposing party is in charge. Not every foreign policy initiative needs to be run through the Defense Department. The next president could use the bully pulpit to encourage and embrace more public debate about the United States’ role in the world. Restoring the norm of valuing expertise, while still paying tribute to the wisdom of crowds, would not hurt either. Nor would respecting democracy at home while promoting the rule of law abroad.

All these steps will make the political life of the next president more difficult. In most *Foreign Affairs* articles, this is the moment when the writer calls for a leader to exercise the necessary political will to do the right thing. That exhortation rises sounded implausible, but now it sounds laughable. One hopes that the Church of Perpetual Worry does not turn into an apocalyptic cult. This time, however, the sky may really be falling.

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