

Gone But Not Forgotten

Trump's Long Shadow and the End of American Credibility

By Jonathan Kirshner

In the first lecture of any introduction to international relations class, students are typically warned of the pitiless consequences of anarchy. World politics, they are informed, is a self-help system: in the absence of a global authority to enforce rules, there are no guarantees that the behavior of others—at times, dangerous and malevolent others—will be restrained. With their very survival on the line, countries must anticipate the worst about the world and plan and behave accordingly.

Like most abstractions, IR 101's depiction of the consequences of anarchy is a radical oversimplification, useful as an informal modeling device, as far as it goes. In the real world—that is, for most states, most of the time—survival is not actually at stake when they are deciding which among various possible foreign policies to adopt. And countries rarely retreat into a defensive crouch, unwilling to trust any others, paralyzed by the fear that today's apparent friend will become tomorrow's mortal foe.

Still, also like most abstractions, there is an inviolable kernel of truth to the anarchy fable. Ultimately, the world of states is indeed a self-help system, and so countries must necessarily make guesses about the anticipated future behavior of others—about what seems likely and the range of the possible and the plausible.

This is why even though Donald Trump has become a member of a rather exclusive club—one-term U.S. presidents—the Trump presidency will have enduring consequences for U.S. power and influence in the world. Leo Tolstoy warned that “there are no conditions to which a man may not become accustomed, particularly if he sees that they are accepted by those around him,” and it is easy, especially for most insular Americans, to implicitly normalize what was in fact a norm-shattering approach to foreign policy. Level whatever criticisms you may about the often bloodstained hands of the American colossus on the world stage, but Trump's foreign policy was different: shortsighted, transactional, mercurial, untrustworthy, boorish, personalist, and profoundly illiberal in rhetoric, disposition, and creed.

Some applauded this transformation, but most foreign policy experts, practitioners, and professionals are breathing a sigh of relief that a deeply regrettable, and in many ways embarrassing, interlude has passed. (It is exceedingly unlikely that any future president will exchange “beautiful letters” with and express their “love” for the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.) But such palpable relief must be tempered by a dispiriting truth, rooted in that notion of anarchy: the world cannot unsee the Trump presidency. (Nor, for that matter, can it unsee the way members of the U.S. Congress behaved in the final weeks of the Trump administration, voting opportunistically to overturn an election and helping incite violence at the Capitol.) From this point forward, countries around the globe will have to calculate their interests and expectations with the understanding that the Trump administration is the sort of thing that the U.S. political system can plausibly produce.

Such reassessments will not be to the United States' advantage. For 75 years, the general presumption that the United States was committed to the relationships and institutions it forged and the norms it articulated shaped the world in ways that privileged U.S. interests. If it is increasingly perceived to be feckless and self-serving, the United States will find the world a more hazardous and less welcoming place.

POWER AND PURPOSE

One country tries to anticipate the foreign policy behavior of another by making assessments about two factors: power and purpose. Measuring the former seems straightforward, although it is often not. (France seemed to boast a formidable military in 1939, and the Soviet Union was considered a superpower a half century later, yet both countries suddenly and unexpectedly collapsed under pressure.) Measuring the latter—purpose—requires more guesswork in practice but is even more important. Is a country a friend or a foe, and in either case, for how long? Is a country's word its bond, or are its commitments ephemeral and its pronouncements little more than shallow, opportunistic posturing? Ultimately, these are questions of trust and confidence that require judgment calls. And for better or worse, it is easier to partner with a country whose underlying foreign policy orientation is rooted in purposes that are reasonably consistent over time.

For U.S. partners in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, however, Washington's priorities on the world stage must now be interrogated, and any conclusions reached must be held with qualifications rather than confidence. And there is nothing that President Joe Biden and his team of immaculate professionals can do to stop that. From now on, all countries, everywhere, must hedge their bets about the United States—something that will unnerve allies more than adversaries. Whatever promises are made and best behaviors followed over the next few years, a resurgence of knuckle-dragging America firstism will loom menacingly in the shadows. That possibility will inevitably shape other states' conclusions about their relations with the United States, even as nearly every world leader rushes to shake the hand of the new U.S. president.

Thus, even with the election of Biden—a traditional, centrist liberal internationalist, cut from the same basic foreign policy cloth of every U.S. president (save one) across nine decades—countries will now have to hedge against the prospect of an indifferent, disengaged, and clumsily myopic U.S. foreign policy. After all, anarchy also demands that states see the world as it is, not as they wish it might be. And the warning signs that the United States is perhaps not the country it once was could not be flashing more brightly.

Although the margin of victory in the 2020 U.S. presidential election was wide (the two candidates were separated by seven million votes, a 4.5 percent edge in the popular vote, and 74 electoral votes), it was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a renunciation of Trump. In 2016, some argued that Trump's election was a fluke. This was always whistling past the graveyard, but the case could be made. After all, the election hinged on only about 80,000 votes, spread across three swing states. Even with that, but for the historically contingent geographic quirks of Michigan (the Upper Peninsula) and Florida (the Panhandle), those states would have gone blue. And the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton (who did walk away with the popular vote by a large margin), was, for some key constituencies, a suspect candidate.

The 2020 election put to rest the comforting fable that Trump's election was a fluke. Trump is the United States—or at least a very large part of it. Many Americans will choke on that sentiment, but other countries don't have the luxury of clinging to some idealized version of the United States' national character. Trump presided over dozens of ethical scandals, egregious procedural lapses, and startling indiscretions, most of which would have ended the political career of any other national political figure of the past half century. But the trampling of norms barely registered with most of the American public. Nor did the sheer, horrifying incompetence of the administration's handling of the gravest public health crisis in a century chase Trump from the political scene in disgrace. (Imagine what would have happened to Jimmy Carter, a decent man dealt a difficult hand by an oil shock and the Iranian hostage crisis. Those events were enough to have his approval rating plummet into the 20s and soon send him packing after his landslide defeat in 1980.) Rather, Trump characteristically treated a pandemic that killed well more than a quarter of a million of the people under his charge as a personal inconvenience, to be managed exclusively for perceived political advantage. Even so, 74 million people voted for him—nine million more than did in 2016 and the most votes ever cast for a U.S. candidate for president, with the exception of Biden, who garnered 81 million.

One cannot paint a picture of the American polity and the country's future foreign policy without including the significant possibility of a large role for Trumpism, with or without Trump himself in the Oval Office. Looking ahead four years, America watchers must anticipate that the next U.S. presidential election could turn out quite differently. This does not bode well for U.S. interests and influence in world politics. As Mark Leonard, the director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, observed, "If you know that whatever you're doing will at most last until the next election, you look at everything in a more contingent way."

Indeed, the story of the 2016 election wasn't just about Trump's victory over Clinton; from the perspective of other countries trying to guess the future of U.S. foreign policy, what happened in that year's primaries was even more informative and chilling. In the GOP's contest, a political novice, reality TV star, boastful businessman of questionable repute, and indifferent, only occasional member of the party itself managed to steamroll a strong field of established competitors by disparaging the party's heroes and trampling on its long-held core policy beliefs about global engagement. Because it took place within the Republican Party, this astonishing, unanticipated upheaval cannot be attributed to the possible flaws of Clinton or liberal overreach in the culture wars, explanations subsequently trotted out after the shock of the general election. And a similar story was seen in the Democratic Party's nomination process. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont—another long-shot outsider, an old socialist from a tiny state—came very close to wresting the prize from a powerful political machine fully backed by the party apparatus.

What did Trump and Sanders have in common? Almost nothing—except for their rejection of internationalism. The 2016 campaign revealed that the bipartisan postwar internationalist consensus, cracks in which had been visible and growing for decades, had been shattered. A telling casualty marking the end of American internationalism was the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a far-reaching trade agreement among a dozen Pacific Rim countries, including the United States. The agreement was at the center of the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia. Clinton, as secretary of state, had orchestrated the painstaking negotiations that produced the treaty and crowed that the pact set "the gold standard in trade agreements to open free, transparent, fair trade." Yet during the pitched battle for the Democratic nomination, she was forced to renounce the TPP, which many in her party had been wary of. (Sanders led the charge against what he

described as “another trade deal disaster.”) In fact, the agreement became law thanks only to overwhelming Republican support in both houses of Congress. Trump withdrew from the pact on his first day in office.

IT GETS WORSE

Carrying through to the Biden administration, then, is the observation that the center of political gravity in the United States has shifted away from the engaged internationalism that characterized the previous 75 years before Trump and toward something closer to isolationism, of which there is a long tradition in U.S. history. In assessing the future trajectory of U.S. foreign policy, outside observers will have to make assessments about each political party. Even with Trump out of office, the Republican Party will likely decline to distance itself from Trumpism, given how much elected officials live in fear that Trump will turn his large and loyal following against those who criticize him. Rhetorically at least, the party will likely remain nativistic and nationalist in its attitude toward the rest of the world. The Democratic Party’s foreign policies, even though they may be less overtly malevolent, will not offer much reassurance. Biden can be expected to flood the field with an impressive foreign policy team and give every reassuring impression that the United States will behave as a responsible great power, one that is engaged with the world, respects rules, and follows norms. But his mandate is limited.

Biden, elected mostly on a platform of being everything Trump isn’t, has precious little political capital, and he is unlikely to deploy it for the purpose of fighting for his foreign policy priorities. The Democrats, united in their horror at the Trump presidency, are divided on much else. Visible fissures run through the party, often on generational lines, between the party’s centrist and left-leaning wings. And its median constituent, although neither nativistic nor nationalist, might be described as globalism-wary and even isolationism-curious. The conflicts within the Democratic Party will be exacerbated by the salience of Biden’s age at the time of his inauguration (78). Given that Biden himself has repeatedly hinted that his might very well be a one-term, transitional presidency, his fellow Democrats will quickly begin jockeying for position in the anticipated battle for party leadership. Thus, predicting U.S. behavior will again require looking down the road at the likely range of political outcomes four years into the future.

Worse, foreign assessments of the United States must consider the possibility that it will soon simply be out of the great-power game altogether. Looked at objectively, the country boasts a colossal economy and commands the world’s most impressive military. But as the old saying about sports teams goes, they don’t play the games on paper, and there are reasons to question whether Washington has the wherewithal to behave as a purposeful actor on the world stage and pursue its long-term interests. The problem is not just that with politics no longer stopping at the water’s edge, U.S. foreign policy could veer unpredictably from administration to administration. It is that the United States is taking on water itself. The country has entered what can only be characterized as an age of unreason, with large swaths of its population embracing wild conspiracy theories. The United States today looks like Athens in the final years of the Peloponnesian War or France in the 1930s: a once strong democracy that has become ragged and vulnerable. France, descending into appeasement, would soon well illustrate that a country consumed by domestic social conflict is not one that will likely be capable of practicing a productive, predictable, or trustworthy foreign policy.

NO MORE BLANK CHECKS

This dystopian scenario may not come to pass. It might not even be the most likely American future. But the logic of anarchy requires that all countries must at least process the United States' polarization and domestic dysfunction, think through the implications of that scenario in which all bets are off, and imagine a world in which Washington, for all its raw power, is less relevant in world politics. This prospect will invite major reassessments of U.S. behavior.

Some of the impending revisions will be benign and even beneficial from a U.S. perspective. On the positive side of the ledger, Middle Eastern countries may finally begin to imagine life without strong U.S. military commitments in the region. In 1990, it was understandable that U.S. allies welcomed the U.S.-led war to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. Had that invasion gone unchecked, Iraq would likely have achieved political domination over the vast oil reserves of the entire Persian Gulf region. Thus, in the absence of a peer military competitor or a pressing security threat, the United States was well positioned to repel that aggression.

But much has changed in the intervening three decades. The United States is now the world's largest producer of oil and natural gas; China is currently the biggest export market for Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia; and if anything, given climate change, the United States should be looking to discourage, not subsidize, the burning of fossil fuels. If one were designing U.S. foreign policy from scratch today, it would be quite difficult to justify a U.S. security commitment in the Gulf. The U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia, in particular, has always been more a marriage of convenience than a deeply rooted friendship. That was especially evident in the Trump era, which featured the shady princeling-to-princeling connection between the president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince. But personal ties are the most fleeting. They account for the Trump administration's near silence over the assassination of the Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi (allegedly ordered by the crown prince himself) and its tacit approval of the humanitarian nightmare that is the Saudi war in Yemen. In contrast, as a candidate, Biden said that should he be elected, Saudi Arabia would no longer enjoy a "dangerous blank check." It is always possible that campaign-trail rhetoric will yield to the realities of power politics, but in assessing their own national security in the coming years, Saudi Arabia and its fellow Gulf kingdoms have no choice but to at least anticipate the withdrawal of U.S. power from the region.

Israel must confront similar calculations. During the Obama administration and after, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made the radical decision, rare and risky in the annals of diplomacy, to throw in his lot with a foreign political party rather than a country. By sidestepping President Barack Obama to work directly with congressional Republicans and then by embracing Trump with a bear hug, Netanyahu hitched his strategic wagon to the star of a U.S. president who did not see past the perceived domestic political advantages to be gained from his Middle East policy. Trump reciprocated by dashing off another political blank check, recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, withholding criticism of any of that country's transgressions (and thus abandoning the notion that the United States might be an honest broker in peace negotiations with the Palestinians), and essentially bribing some countries to normalize their diplomatic relations with Israel—all without receiving anything in return from the perspective of U.S. national interests. It remains to be seen whether bilateral relations between Israel and the United States will emerge unscathed now that U.S. diplomacy in the Middle East has passed from the hands of Trump's small coterie of Middle East advisers.

AFTER AMERICA

If the post-Trump perceptions of the United States in the Middle East may be good news for U.S. power and interests, the same cannot be said for the rethinking that will take place in the rest of the world. And in contrast to in the Gulf region and the Middle East more generally, in Europe and Asia, the United States has enormous geostrategic, political, and economic interests—as it has for a century. What happens in Europe and East Asia, which are among the world’s vital centers of economic activity, matters for the United States. Reduced engagement with and commitment to partners in these regions will create opportunities for others—actors who will be indifferent or even hostile to what the United States wants in the world. These challenges defy easy reassurance. Biden will surely (and wisely) reaffirm the U.S. commitment to NATO. It is unlikely that the alliance would have survived a second Trump administration, given Trump’s ambivalence about democratic allies in general and participation in what he oddly perceived to be a dues-paying organization in particular. Will the alliance survive much past 2025? There are reasons to be doubtful.

In 1993, the realist international relations scholar Kenneth Waltz argued that with the Soviet Union gone, NATO had outlived its usefulness, and he predicted, “NATO’s days are not numbered, but its years are.” The alliance turned out to have decades of life left, of course. What Waltz missed was that NATO has always been more than a narrow military alliance; it is also a broader security community of like-minded states and a stabilizing force on a historically war-prone continent. As such, the alliance has advanced what another realist scholar, Arnold Wolfers, called “milieu goals”—measures designed to make the international environment more benign. NATO has managed to achieve these goals at very little cost, considering that it has always been unlikely that the United States would cut its overall spending on defense and thus save money if it withdrew from NATO.

But now, NATO faces existential threats on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, authoritarian backsliding in Hungary, Poland, and Turkey is endangering the notion of the alliance as a like-minded security community. (It was this notion that caused Spain to join the alliance in 1982, after it transitioned to democracy.) A NATO that contains authoritarian members will rot from within. In the United States, meanwhile, growing skepticism of internationalism may mean that the country no longer has any interest in pursuing milieu goals. Washington might simply pick up its marbles and go home. Europe would be compelled to test the theory that the alliance is a force for comity and stability. But the implications of American abandonment would go far beyond the continent. It could also presage a post-American world that is darker, more authoritarian, and less able to address collective challenges.

There is no region of the world where revised assessments about the United States will be more consequential than Asia. Many observers fret over the prospect of a ruinous shooting war between China and the United States, as Beijing looks to assert what it considers to be its rightful place as the dominant power in the region. Emerging great powers with revisionist aspirations are nothing new and are commonly destabilizing, as they invariably step on the toes of the contented guardians of the status quo. That said, the future of Asia will be determined more by political calculations than military confrontations. Regional actors, once again, will have to make guesses about the future international disposition and reliability of the United States.

The main geopolitical assessment that regional powers will have to make is not whether the United States would win a war against China; it is whether the United States will stay involved. Will Washington retain its alliance commitments? Will it demonstrate enough political engagement and recognizable military capacity to give regional powers the confidence to balance against China? If countries figure that the United States is out, or indifferent, then many will decide they have little choice but to bandwagon with China, given its overwhelming power. If it becomes apparent that China's power and influence will be left unchecked, countries in the region will increasingly accede to more of China's demands in bilateral disputes and show greater deference for its preferences more generally.

The ground in Asia is clearly shifting. Washington renounced its own grand trade agreement, the TPP, and a TPP that includes the United States is not likely coming back. As international trade agreements will almost certainly remain a lightning rod and perhaps even a litmus test for powerful constituencies in both political parties, trying to breathe life back into the TPP by joining its successor pact is unlikely to be successful—nor deemed worth the anticipated political blowback. China, in contrast, has picked up that dropped ball and recently signed on to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Less ambitious than the TPP, that agreement nevertheless boasts countries that intended to join the U.S.-led pact: Australia, Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, and South Korea, among others. And international politics and economics are not easily disentangled. Trump commonly disparaged military allies as freeloaders and viewed American troops stationed abroad, including in South Korea, as a for-profit, mercenary force. China is now South Korea's largest export market, and South Korea sells almost twice as much to that country as it does to the United States. Should Seoul assess that a future U.S. president might cut the cord of the U.S. alliance with South Korea, South Korea might increasingly fall into the orbit of China's influence.

SCARRED FOR LIFE

The future of U.S. influence—in Europe, Asia, and everywhere else—depends a great deal on what the United States says it will do and whether it follows through with consistent actions. Biden is capable of following through. But in an anarchic world, U.S. influence will depend at least as much on something else: how other states measure long-term American purpose. By producing a Trump presidency and calling attention to the underlying domestic dysfunctions that allowed a previously inconceivable development to occur, the United States is now looked at far differently than it once was. These new and consequential perceptions will endure, and for some time.

A second Trump administration would have done irretrievable damage to the United States as an actor in world politics. But even with Trump's defeat, the rest of the world cannot ignore the country's deep and disfiguring scars. They will not soon heal.

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