

Where to Go From Here
Rebooting American Foreign Policy
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Every new U.S. administration takes several months to staff itself properly, master new and often unfamiliar responsibilities, and develop a comprehensive strategy for American foreign policy. The Trump administration's start has been especially rocky. But the administration has already executed a noticeable course shift on foreign policy and international affairs, exchanging some of its early outsider rhetoric and personnel for more conventional choices. If it can continue to elaborate and professionalize its new approach, it could achieve a number of successes. But for that to happen, the administration will have to act with considerably greater discipline and work to frame its policies toward regional and global issues as part of a coherent, strategic approach to international relations that benefits the United States, its allies and partners, and the world at large.

THE CHALLENGE IN ASIA

President Donald Trump has properly concluded that the greatest threat to U.S. national security is North Korea's accelerating nuclear and missile programs, which may give Pyongyang the ability to launch nuclear-tipped missiles at the continental United States in a matter of months or at most years. The president also seems to have concluded, correctly, that several decades of U.S. policy, mostly consisting of sanctions and on-again, off-again negotiations aimed at ridding North Korea of nuclear weapons, have failed. The challenge now is to choose among the three plausible alternative options for moving forward: acceptance, military intervention, or more creative diplomacy. A fourth possibility, that of regime change, does not qualify as a serious option, since it is impossible to assess its chances or consequences.

In theory, the United States and other powers could accept a North Korean nuclear capability and rely on deterrence to lower the risk of an attack and missile defenses to reduce the damage should one occur. The problem is that deterrence and defenses might not work perfectly—so the acceptance option means living with a perpetual risk of catastrophe. Moreover, even if Pyongyang were deterred from using the weapons it developed, it would still be able to transfer them to other actors for the right price. And even if its nuclear capability were never used or transferred, acquiescence to North Korea's continued possession of nuclear weapons would further dilute the nonproliferation regime and conceivably lead Japan and South Korea to rethink their nonnuclear postures.

Military intervention could be either preventive (moving deliberately to destroy a gathering threat) or preemptive (moving quickly to head off an immediate one). The problem here is that any such strike would be a huge leap into the unknown with possibly devastating consequences. Officials could not know in advance just what a military operation would accomplish and how the North Koreans would react. Given Pyongyang's ability to destroy large parts of Seoul using conventional, nonnuclear forces, the South Korean government is understandably leery of the

intervention option, and so any moves along these lines would need to be planned and coordinated with extreme care.

The unattractiveness of both acceptance and intervention is what keeps bringing policymakers back to the third option, trying to cap and reverse the North Korean nuclear threat through negotiations. But as decades of failed efforts have proved, diplomacy is no panacea. So the challenge on this front is not just getting back to the table but also figuring out how to make rapid progress once there. This could be done by breaking the issue's resolution into two stages, with an interim deal that would freeze Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs, followed by longer-term efforts to reduce and eliminate the programs entirely.

The interim deal could best be executed as a bilateral agreement between the United States and North Korea, with other governments kept involved and informed through consultations. The negotiations should have a deadline for reaching agreement, to ensure that Pyongyang doesn't use the talks simply to buy time for further progress on its weapons programs. The North would have to agree to pause its testing of warheads and missiles while the negotiations continued, and the United States and South Korea would have to agree not to strike North Korea during the same period. In exchange for accepting a comprehensive, open-ended freeze on its nuclear and missile programs, intrusive inspections designed to ensure that the freeze was being honored, and a ban on any transfers of nuclear materials or missile technology to third parties, North Korea would get some sanctions relief and an agreement formally ending the Korean War, a form of de facto recognition. Follow-on talks would deal with denuclearization and other concerns (such as human rights) in exchange for an end to the sanctions and the normalization of ties.

An interim agreement would not solve the North Korean nuclear problem, but it would keep it from getting any worse and lower the risks of war and instability—as positive a result as one could imagine in the current circumstances. Since Chinese pressure on North Korea would be essential to achieve such a deal, this option would build logically on the administration's early investment in good relations with its counterpart in Beijing. And even if diplomacy failed again, at least the United States would have demonstrated that it tried negotiations before turning to one of the other, more controversial options.

As for the U.S. relationship with China itself, the administration's primary goal should be to emphasize cooperation over North Korea, the most urgent item on the national security agenda. The two countries' economic integration gives both Washington and Beijing a stake in keeping relations on course. China's leaders are likely to focus for the foreseeable future on domestic concerns more than foreign policy ones, and the United States should let them do so. That means leaving in place long-standing U.S. policies on bilateral issues such as Taiwan, trade, arms sales, and the South China Sea; the Trump administration should avoid adopting positions on these issues that could either trigger a distracting crisis or compromise U.S. interests. The result would be a "North Korea first," but not a "North Korea only," U.S. policy toward China.

Regarding the Asia-Pacific more generally, the administration should reassure U.S. allies about

the United States' continued commitment to the region—something that has been called into question by Trump's abrupt withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and by various statements from the president and other administration officials. It would have made more sense for Washington to work with the other signatories to amend the TPP (as it appears to be doing in regard to the North American Free Trade Agreement) and join the modified pact. This remains an option, although it may be difficult to achieve. Failing that, the administration could attempt to work out an understanding with Congress that would allow the United States to join the TPP but commit the country to certain courses of punitive action in specific circumstances (currency manipulation, intellectual property theft, large government subsidies, and so on), similar to what was done when it came to U.S.-Soviet arms control agreements. The understanding would be codified and voted on at the same time as the trade agreement itself, as a binding package, to reassure the agreement's critics.

FRIENDS AND FOES

In Europe, Washington should pursue stability. The EU is imperfect in many ways, but it remains a source of peace and prosperity on the continent. Its continued erosion or breakup would represent a major setback not just for crucial U.S. allies but also for the United States itself, both strategically and materially. The EU's next few years will already be tense thanks to the negotiations over Brexit and possible crises in Italy and elsewhere. The United States has little leverage to bring to bear on the continent's immediate future, but at the very least, Washington should voice its support for the EU and stop signaling its sympathy for its opponents.

Russia has been aggressively supporting just such anti-EU forces in order to weaken and divide what it sees as a hostile foreign actor, and Russia's interference in Western elections needs to be thoroughly investigated and aggressively countered. Washington's challenge will be figuring out how to support Europe and NATO and check Russia's political skullduggery while remaining open to cooperation with Moscow on making at least parts of Syria safe for residents, on counterterrorism, and on other issues of mutual concern. The administration has made its point that NATO members ought to spend more on defense; going forward, it would be more useful to discuss how to get more defensive bang for the bucks being spent. And although there is no case for bringing Ukraine into NATO, there is one for doing more to support its self-defense. Consistent with this, the sanctions against Russia levied over its actions in Ukraine should continue until those actions stop or, in the case of Crimea, are reversed.

In the Middle East, the Trump administration helped itself significantly with its quick, limited air strike in April in response to the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons. The strike reinforced the international norm against the use of weapons of mass destruction and sent a reassuring signal to local partners, who, during the Obama years, had become increasingly worried about Washington's willingness to back up its threats with actions. The challenge now is to embed such actions in a broader strategy toward the Syrian conflict and the Middle East at large.

However desirable a change of regime in Syria may be, it is unlikely to come from within anytime soon, and it would be incredibly difficult and costly to accomplish from without. Nor is the United States well positioned to ensure that a successor regime will be more desirable. For the foreseeable future, therefore, Washington should concentrate its attention on attacking the Islamic State, or ISIS, and weakening the group's hold on territory in Iraq and Syria. The Iraqi army is capable enough to control liberated areas in Iraq, but there is no counterpart to it yet in Syria, so getting such a force ready, drawn primarily from local Sunni groups, should be a priority.

Turkey is a U.S. ally, but it can no longer be considered a true partner. Under Recep Tayyip Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian rule, the chief goal of Turkish foreign policy seems to be the suppression of Kurdish nationalism, even at the price of undermining the anti-ISIS effort. Washington correctly chose to increase its armed support for Syrian Kurds fighting ISIS—and because this will cause friction with Ankara, it should reduce U.S. dependence on access to Turkish military bases for these and other operations.

The Iran nuclear deal is imperfect, but the administration has been right not to tear it up and start over. Doing so would leave Washington isolated and Tehran unconstrained. What the United States should do instead is insist on full compliance with the agreement's terms, counter Iran's regional push for influence where it can, and prepare for how to constrain Iran's nuclear might after the deal expires. At the same time, Washington should resist being drawn in too deeply on the side of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in Yemen. The conflict there is fast becoming a military disaster and a humanitarian tragedy, and the fact that the rebels are backed by Iran is insufficient justification for getting trapped in a quagmire.

The struggle against terrorism will be long, difficult, and never fully successful. The Trump administration has said various things about its intentions regarding what used to be called "the Middle East peace process." The unfortunate fact is that neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians appear ready to move forward; the most Washington can achieve right now may be to keep the situation from deteriorating further (which is actually very important, because in the Middle East, things can always get worse). There is no reason to believe that the situation is ripe for resolution or ambitious diplomatic efforts. The administration should concentrate instead on reducing the odds of violence around Jerusalem's holy sites (something that argues against moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem), strengthening the hand of Palestinian moderates, limiting settlement activity, and exploring unilateral but coordinated arrangements that would improve on the status quo and set the stage for more ambitious diplomacy should the parties decide they are prepared to make meaningful compromises for peace.

The Middle East is not the place to look for quick or easy victories. The struggle against terrorism, jihadist and otherwise, will inevitably be long, difficult, and never fully successful. Terrorism cannot be eliminated, only combated, and such an effort will continue to require a mix of intelligence sharing and cooperation with friendly governments, persistent pressure on terrorist financing and recruitment, and occasional military action. The number of U.S. forces deployed in

Iraq, Syria, and the region more generally will likely need to be maintained or selectively increased.

A TIME TO LEAD

Back during the George W. Bush administration, in trying to articulate what the United States really wanted from China, Robert Zoellick, the deputy secretary of state, framed the question as one of whether Beijing was prepared to act as “a responsible stakeholder” in the international system. The concept is a useful one and applies now to the United States, the founder and dominant power within that system. So what constitutes responsible behavior for Washington in the world at large at this juncture?

One element is giving appropriate attention to both interests and ideals. The Trump administration has shown a clear preference for not involving the United States in the internal affairs of other countries. Such realism is often warranted, given Washington’s multiple priorities and limited leverage in such matters. But there is a danger in taking this approach too far, since prudent nonintervention can all too easily shade into active support for deeply problematic regimes. Careless relationships with “friendly tyrants,” as such rulers used to be called, have burned the United States often in the past, and so it is worrying to see Washington take what look like the first steps down such a path again with Egypt, the Philippines, and Turkey. Friends need to speak candidly to friends about the errors they may be making. Such communications should normally take place privately and without sanction. But they do need to occur, lest the United States tarnish its reputation, encourage even worse behavior, and set back efforts to promote more open societies and stability around the world. The president should also understand that what he says about U.S. institutions, including the media, the judiciary, and Congress, is listened to closely around the world and has the potential to reduce respect for the United States while encouraging leaders elsewhere to weaken the checks and balances on their rule.

Another element of responsible behavior is continued support for international aid and development, which is a cost-effective way to promote American values and interests simultaneously. In recent memory, for example, Colombia was racked by civil war and served as a major source of drugs coming into the United States. Since then, the provision of hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. aid has helped stabilize the country and secure a delicate peace—saving countless lives and dollars as a result. Similar stories play out when Washington helps foreign partners address terrorism, piracy, drug trafficking, poverty, deforestation, and epidemic disease. When it gives aid wisely and conditionally, the United States is not a soft touch but a smart investor.

The administration would do well to tone down some of its rhetoric on trade. Technological innovation has been a much more important source of domestic job losses than trade or offshoring, and embracing protectionism will only encourage others to do the same, in the process killing off more jobs. What is needed is a full-fledged national initiative to increase economic security, consisting of educational and training programs, temporary wage support for

displaced workers, the repatriation of corporate profits to encourage investment at home, and infrastructure spending. The last, in particular, is a multipurpose tool that could at once create jobs, increase competitiveness, and build the country's resilience against natural disasters and terrorism.

Something similar holds for immigration, which should be treated as a practical more than a political issue. However the American body politic ultimately decides to handle legal and illegal immigration policy, the danger to the country supposedly posed by immigrants and refugees has been exaggerated and is not a major national security threat. The administration should cease gratuitously insulting its southern neighbor (and promoting anti-Americanism there) by insisting that Mexico pay for a border wall. And singling out individuals from Muslim countries for special scrutiny and differential treatment risks radicalizing significant numbers of their coreligionists at home and abroad.

The administration (and Congress) needs to be careful not to set the country on a path of rapidly increasing debt. The danger is that a combination of steep corporate and individual tax cuts, higher levels of defense spending and higher interest rates, and no reform of entitlements will do just that. Financing the debt will come to crowd out other useful forms of spending and investment (reducing American competitiveness) and leave the United States more vulnerable to market forces and the politically motivated decisions of governments that are large holders and purchasers of U.S. Treasuries.

One last policy matter involves the climate. The intensity of the opposition in some quarters to the 2015 Paris accord and to acceptance of climate change as the result of human activity is something of a mystery. The agreement is a model of creative multilateralism, one totally consistent with sovereignty; the administration would be wise to embrace it. The targets set for U.S. greenhouse gas emissions are goals the United States set for itself; as a result, the government retains the right to change them, when and how it sees fit. The good news is that the availability of new technologies, state and local regulations, and the requirements for access to many global markets will likely mean that the United States can meet its Paris goals without sacrificing economic growth.

As for personnel and process, the administration hurt itself at first by underestimating the complexity of running the government and taking a petulant and idiosyncratic approach to appointments. As a result, most senior national security and foreign policy staff positions are being filled on a temporary basis by civil servants or have been left open entirely, hamstringing effective government operations. Any thoughts of a major bureaucratic restructuring should be postponed until the administration is filled with the requisite number of qualified officials.

Trump clearly prefers an informal decision-making process, with various voices included and many points of entry, and presidents get their way. But such an approach has downsides as well as upsides, and if the administration wants to avoid the dangers that come with excessive improvisation, it needs to ensure that the formal National Security Council policy process

dominates the informal one—and that significant informal deliberations are ultimately integrated into the formal process rather than carried on separately.

The president also clearly prefers to be unpredictable. This can make sense as a tactic, but not as a strategy. Keeping foes off balance can be useful, but keeping friends and allies off balance is less so—especially friends and allies that have put their security in American hands for generations. The less steady they judge those hands to be, the more they may decide to look out for themselves, ignoring Washington's requests and considering side deals to protect their interests. Frequent policy reversals, even those that are welcome, come at a substantial cost to the United States' credibility and to its reputation for reliability.

Down that route lies the unraveling of the postwar order that the United States has worked so hard to create and maintain. It is important not to forget that the United States has been remarkably well served by this order. Where things have gone the most wrong—in Korea, when U.S. forces marched north of the 38th parallel in what would become a costly and unsuccessful effort to reunify the peninsula by force, in Vietnam, in Iraq—it was because of overreach by U.S. policymakers rather than a requirement to act on behalf of the order.

But that order is now in decline. Many of its components need to be modernized or supplemented, and new rules and arrangements are needed to deal with the various challenges of globalization. But the international project should be a renovation, not a teardown. New challenges may have arisen, but the old challenges have not gone away, so the old solutions to them are still necessary even if they are no longer sufficient. The strategic focus for U.S. foreign policy should be preservation and adaptation, not disruption, so that the United States and those willing to work with it can better contend with the regional and, even more, the global challenges that increasingly define this era.

In that regard, the president's campaign slogan of "America First" was and is unfortunate, because it appears to signal a narrower U.S. foreign policy, one lacking in a larger purpose or vision. It has been interpreted abroad as suggesting that friends and allies now come second, at best. Over time, "America First" will lead others to put themselves first, which in turn will make them less likely to take into account (much less give priority to) American interests and preferences.

The slogan also unfortunately reinforces the mistaken notion that there is a sharp tradeoff between money and effort spent on international affairs and those spent on domestic concerns. In a global world, Americans will inevitably be affected by what happens beyond their country's borders. The United States needs both guns and butter, and national security is determined by how well a country meets its external and internal challenges alike. The good news is that the United States, which now spends only half the percentage of its wealth on defense that it did during the Cold War, can afford both.

If the administration does decide to retain the phrase, it should at least recognize its shortcomings

and counteract them. This means finding ways to make clear that although the United States does follow its own interests, it does not do so at its friends' and partners' expense. American patriotism can be defined and operationalized in ways compatible with responsible global leadership. And figuring out how to do that from here on in is the Trump administration's central challenge.