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Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

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Friday, January 18, 2019 - 12:00am

Trump's Foreign Policy Is No Longer Unpredictable  
Gone Are the Days of a Divided Administration  
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It has become a commonplace to describe the foreign policy of U.S. President Donald Trump as unpredictable. But doing so mischaracterizes the man and the policy. In fact, although Trump's actions may often be shocking, they are rarely surprising. His most controversial positions—questioning NATO, seeking to pull out of Syria, starting trade wars—are all consistent with the worldview he has publicly espoused since the 1980s.

The unpredictability of this administration originated not in Trump's views but in the struggle <sup>[1]</sup> between the president and his political advisers on the one hand and the national security establishment on the other. Until recently, these two camps vied for supremacy, and it was difficult to know which would win on any given issue.

At the two-year mark, it is now clear that the president is dominating this struggle, even if he has not yet won outright. For the first time, it is possible to identify a singular Trump administration foreign policy, as the president's team coalesces around his ideas. This policy consists of a narrow, transactional relationship with other nations, a preference for authoritarian governments over other democracies, a mercantilist approach to international economic policy, a general disregard for human rights and the rule of law, and the promotion of nationalism and unilateralism at the expense of multilateralism.

## WHAT SET TRUMP APART

Many U.S. presidents have been elected with no real foreign policy experience. Some had ideas that contradicted a core tenet of U.S. foreign policy—for example, Jimmy Carter's position in favor of pulling troops out of Korea. Trump, however, is different. He is the only president ever elected on a platform that explicitly rejected all of the pillars of U.S. grand strategy.

Although Trump has changed his mind on many issues, he has clear, consistent, visceral foreign policy instincts that date back three decades. He has long rejected the United States' security alliances as unfair to the taxpayer and accused allies of conning Washington into defending them for free. He has long seen trade deficits as a threat to U.S. interests and has rejected virtually all trade deals that the United States has negotiated since World War II. And he has a history of expressing admiration for strongmen around the world: in 1990, for example, he lamented in an interview that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had not cracked down on demonstrators as Beijing had in Tiananmen Square one year before.

During his presidential campaign, Trump not only refused to disavow these instincts but doubled down on them. He drew a moral equivalence between the Kremlin under Russian President Vladimir Putin and the U.S. government; criticized NATO; praised Saddam Hussein's toughness on terrorists and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's ascent <sup>[2]</sup> to power; and opposed free trade. His position on foreign policy had an immediate and enduring effect: it prompted dozens of Republican foreign policy experts to condemn him publicly.

Bereft of establishment advisers, Trump managed to sign up a handful of unknowns and a couple of former officials—for example, Michael Flynn and Walid Phares—but this was largely for show. Throughout his campaign, Trump relied on his own instincts and added a few new issues, particularly strong opposition to illegal immigration and criticism of trade with China.

After he won, Trump had a problem. He was completely unprepared to govern and had hardly anyone on his team who was qualified to hold high office in matters of national security. This dearth, coupled with his continuing grudge against the establishment experts who opposed him during the campaign, led him to turn to retired generals and captains of industry, including James Mattis as secretary of defense, Rex Tillerson as secretary of state, Gary Cohn as director of the National Economic Council, and, after a few weeks in office, H. R. McMaster as national security adviser.

## THE ADMINISTRATION'S TWO PHASES

The first phase of Trump's term in office—that of constraint—lasted from his inauguration until August 2017. During these seven months, Trump said and did many controversial things. He refused <sup>[3]</sup> to endorse NATO's Article 5 while giving a speech at NATO headquarters in Brussels, and he announced the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris agreement on climate change. But for the most part, the administration followed an interagency process (whereby decisions were made through a formal consultation process with the relevant departments and agencies, culminating in meetings of the national security team in the Situation Room) and Trump grudgingly accepted the advice of his cabinet. He did not pull out of the North American Free Trade Agreement. He reversed himself on NATO. He reached out to Asian allies. And he remained in the Iran nuclear deal.

Soon, however, the president began to push back against his advisers. In mid-July 2017, he complained bitterly about having to renew the waivers as part of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and blamed his advisers for not giving him an option to withdraw. A few weeks later, at a Camp David meeting to decide on Afghanistan policy, he grew frustrated <sup>[4]</sup> at McMaster's assertiveness in arguing to keep U.S. troops in place. Trump grudgingly conceded but let his displeasure be known.

By the fall of 2017, the second phase of the Trump administration's foreign policy—that of unilateral action—had begun. In this period, which continues to the present day, Trump has tried to bypass the formal deliberative interagency process in his decision-making and has made his preferences clear. In December 2017, over the objections of his team, he announced he was moving the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. In May of last year, he withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal. He imposed tariffs on friends and rivals alike. He renewed his criticism of NATO at the 2018 Brussels summit and pushed hard to pull U.S. troops out of Syria. Perhaps most famously, he decided to meet with Kim in Singapore without consulting his national security cabinet and also made the unilateral decision to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki and proceeded to defy <sup>[5]</sup> his advisers by embracing the Russian leader at the summit's press conference.

To facilitate this shift, Trump needed a new team that would empower him, not stand in his way. This was the story of 2018. It began with the removal of Tillerson, McMaster, and Cohn in a three-week period in March and April. Their respective replacements—Mike Pompeo, John Bolton, and Larry Kudlow—all had one thing in common: personal loyalty to Trump. The trend continued with UN Ambassador Nikki Haley's departure and concluded with Mattis' resignation on December 21 following Trump's announcement of a U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria.

The appointment of Bolton was particularly crucial to Trump's foreign policy autonomy. As long as a member of the national security establishment held the position of national security adviser, Trump was deprived of the agenda-setting power that controlling the interagency process entails. Bolton gave him this power. There were bumps along the way, of course. Bolton reportedly <sup>[6]</sup> had to promise Trump that he would not drag him into a new war, and several

weeks into Bolton's tenure, Trump blamed him for trying to sabotage U.S. outreach to Kim. In general, however, Trump now has a team that seeks not to minimize the impact of his decisions but to maximize it.

There have been some positive developments during this phase of Trump's foreign policy. In December 2017 and January 2018, for example, the administration put forth a National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy that shifted focus from terrorism to great-power competition, a development that many foreign policy experts in Washington welcomed. The strategies recognized the challenge that Russia and China posed to the U.S.-led international order and affirmed the importance of alliances. The president, however, seems uninterested in the change of emphasis, having spoken about it only once. In his [remarks](#) <sup>[7]</sup> introducing the National Security Strategy, Trump uttered a single sentence about rival powers—immediately followed by a plea for the importance of cooperation with Russia.

## A UNIFIED FOREIGN POLICY

The struggle between the president and his team defined his first two years. Although there is still a substantive gap between them, there is now considerable alignment as well. For the first time, observers can identify a unified, if still incomplete, Trump foreign policy in which the administration accommodates the president's impulses and seeks to act on them.

This unified foreign policy is one in which the Trump administration has [no permanent friends and no permanent enemies](#) <sup>[8]</sup>. It takes a transactional approach with all nations, places little value in historical ties, and seeks immediate benefits ranging from trade and procurement to diplomatic support. As it happens, authoritarian governments are more inclined to offer such swift concessions to the United States, with the result that the Trump administration finds it easier to deal with them than with democratic allies. Consider the contrast between Saudi Arabia and Japan. Saudi Arabia was [able to reduce the price of oil](#) <sup>[9]</sup> to appease the president after the president sided with it following the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi. By contrast, Japan lost out despite Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's early efforts to flatter the president—Trump's embrace of Kim has unnerved Japanese officials, and he continues to threaten to impose tariffs on Japanese cars.

The Trump administration is now united in its willingness to use tariffs, including against allies and partners, to advance its economic agenda. There may still be some differences over other tactics, but the larger debate on international economic strategy, which raged in 2017, is over. The administration regularly seeks to use U.S. leverage to gain an economic advantage over other countries. Consider, for example, how Trump's team entertained Poland's bid to pay for a U.S. military base in its country and how the administration has [pressured](#) <sup>[10]</sup> the United Kingdom to pursue a hard Brexit so that the United States could pocket concessions in talks on a bilateral U.S.-British free trade agreement.

The administration has embraced nationalism and disdained multilateralism as part of its overarching philosophical framework—something evident in speeches by Trump, Bolton, and Pompeo. The administration also has little regard for democracy and human rights, except in the cases of Cuba, Iran, and Venezuela. This worldview is manifest in Washington's opposition to the European Union, support for authoritarian leaders who defy international norms, and withdrawal from international organizations and treaties. At the same time, the administration's thinking remains ad hoc and unsophisticated—the administration is leaning heavily on Germany to cancel the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, but according to the doctrine the German government should just follow its own interests.

Trump's approach to Europe varies by region. The administration is engaging unconditionally with central and eastern Europe, where it provides political support to Hungarian autocrat Viktor Orbán and is working on increasing liquefied natural gas exports to counter Russian influence. By contrast, its agenda with western Europe has been much more hostile and seems to consist

only of points of disagreement, including opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, free trade with Europe, and defense spending on NATO, as well as its disagreements with the European Union over Iran.

In East Asia, Trump's policy has two main components—China and North Korea. On the former, Trump's desire to win the trade war with Beijing has led him to support the broader efforts to balance China that some of his advisers have championed, which include countering Chinese political influence and reorienting the U.S. military to compete with China. But this support could be tested as Chinese President Xi Jinping's rhetoric on Taiwan heats up, and particularly if the trade war is resolved—would Trump stand up to China over Taiwan if he felt he was championing a trade deal that offered the United States significant concessions? The administration's North Korea policy, meanwhile, consists of an informal bargain whereby the United States allows for a thawing of relations so long as Kim agrees not to test missiles or nuclear weapons, even if this brings no meaningful progress on denuclearization. Some administration officials, particularly Bolton, have reservations about this strategy of accommodation, but they defer to the president.

Differences remain between the president and his team. The most striking example is in U.S. Middle East policy. Trump and his advisers agree on taking a hard line against Iran. But the president is deeply reluctant to commit U.S. resources to rolling back Iranian influence in Syria and would like to see a retrenchment from the region. In his view, U.S. efforts should be confined to supporting allies in taking any actions they deem fit to counter Iran (such as Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen), imposing sanctions, and pulling out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. This is the one issue where the president's current team has made statements that appear to contradict him. For instance, on a trip to the Middle East, Bolton said [11] that U.S. troops would not leave Syria until the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) was fully defeated and the Kurds were protected. On the whole, however, Trump's foreign policy is more unified than ever before.

## WHAT COMES NEXT

Paradoxically, the advent of a more unified and predictable U.S. foreign policy is likely to weaken American influence and destabilize the international order. A deeply divided Trump administration was the best case for those who believe in the United States' postwar strategy, defined by strong alliances, an open global economy, and broad support for democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. Because Trump was never going to change his worldview, his administration has had to be marked by either division or agreement on his terms. We now have the latter. Thus begins phase three—the impact of a unified Trump administration on the world.

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[2] <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-north-korean-leader-kim-jong-gotta-give/story?id=36198345>

[3] <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/trump-declines-to-affirm-natos-article-5/528129/>

[4] [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/its-a-hard-problem-inside-trumps-decision-to-send-more-troops-to-afghanistan/2017/08/21/14dcb126-868b-11e7-a94f-3139abce39f5\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.075462590847](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/its-a-hard-problem-inside-trumps-decision-to-send-more-troops-to-afghanistan/2017/08/21/14dcb126-868b-11e7-a94f-3139abce39f5_story.html?utm_term=.075462590847)

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[10] <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/07/12/trump-backed-brexiteer-then-he-used-it-as-leverage-219001>

[11] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/06/trump-bolton-syria-withdrawal-conditional>