

“America First” Meets Liberal Internationalism¹

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Introduction

As both a presidential candidate, and then president, Donald Trump advocated for a dramatic change in the direction of American foreign policy, which he labelled “America First.” His vision stood in stark contrast to the liberal internationalism pursued by most presidents since World War II. Under this vision, unilateralism would replace multilateralism; retrenchment would replace engagement; pursuit of short-term, transactional American interests above all else would replace international cooperation. These dramatic changes in direction were to be accomplished through countless smaller steps taken across many areas and partnerships.

A central claim we made prior to the start of Trump’s term² was that his attempts to change American foreign policy would be constrained by domestic and international forces. In terms of domestic constraints, elements of American democracy—its checks and balances—would make radical change difficult. As we show below, agents within key institutions did in fact push back against many of the Trump administration’s policy changes. The usual suspects, like Congress, interest groups, and the American foreign policy and military bureaucracies, played large roles. The judicial system was a surprisingly strong and unexpected constraining force. The media also kept keen attention on the changes proposed by the administration. Trump would have been able to make many more changes had he faced fewer domestic constraints. As Robert Jervis argues in his essay in this volume, “some realities proved obdurate.”

The second set of constraints arose from international pressure on the US, and especially reactions to confrontational and unilateral policies that Trump pursued. Trump wanted to change relations with US allies by making them do more for themselves and pay more, and to negotiate new deals with its partners, competitors, and enemies. But the United States’ allies and enemies remain the same today as they were four years ago. Our interdependent planet favors engagement, cooperation, and multilateralism. Unilateral policies are unlikely to advance America’s main goals; indeed, they are likely to backfire and undermine its security and prosperity. And so multilateral engagement remains in America’s national interest as the best strategy for securing peace and prosperity.

Overall, Trump was unable to fundamentally change the direction of US foreign policy. While the tone did change, the underlying policies were often constrained, as we expected. At the same time, Trump’s foreign policy weakened the United States. His undiplomatic rhetoric, his norm-

breaking behavior, and his inconstant policy maneuvers alienated America's allies and friends, and instilled greater boldness in its competitors and enemies. All of this left the US with a less secure position in world politics at a time when China's rise creates new uncertainties.

Taking Stock

Overview

We proceed by breaking apart US foreign policy into separate domains and comparing Trump's claims about what his administration would accomplish and what it actually did. Predictions are difficult to make and interpret, especially when the specific foreign policy issues and crises that will arise during an administration are unknown *ex ante*. We therefore focus on benchmarking our arguments by assessing the degree to which domestic and international constraints limited Trump's policy-altering ambitions. We focus on trade, immigration, and international institutions. Our previous article showed support for our claims around foreign aid, and largely supported our claims in the case of climate change.³

Non-military international institutions

For several important international institutions, including the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International Criminal Court (ICC), and the World Health Organization (WHO), Trump's efforts at dismantling these multilateral institutions met with domestic and international constraints.

In terms of its engagement with non-military international institutions, the Trump administration was frequently adversarial, though its largest threat of withdrawal from the WTO never materialized. Even as late as the spring of 2020, some Republican Senators called for full withdrawal. Anticipating the certain failure of such a move and not wanting to force its Senators to take an official stance, the GOP, leveraging its control of the Finance Committee, used parliamentary maneuvering to scuttle a vote.⁴

The Trump administration did, however, succeed in hamstringing the Dispute Settlement Understanding's Appellate Body in late 2019 by blocking the appointment of new judges. After several judges stepped down, as scheduled, this left the Body without enough judges to rule. (It is worth remembering that the practice of blocking Appellate Body judges began with President Obama.)⁵ While this put the Body on indefinite hiatus, international constraints have blunted its overall impact. In April of 2020 the European Union and 15 other WTO members formed the multi-party interim appeal arbitration arrangement, which functions as a parallel appellate body among its members. The US tried to block a popular candidate for Secretary General of the WTO but Dr. Okonjo-Iweala was ultimately appointed.

Given candidate Trump's antipathy towards international economic institutions, the IMF seemed a likely target for Trump's ire. In the early years of the Trump administration, the leadership of both the IMF and the World Bank took a quiet tack, avoiding any provocation of Trump.⁶ From 2018 and through the pandemic of 2020, the Trump administration's record with respect to the IMF is mixed. When the pandemic hit, Congress increased IMF funding as part of the CARES Act. Many foreign policy elites and IMF member governments called for a tremendous expansion in the IMF's Special Drawing Rights, which allow governments to access a fund of 'synthetic' currencies. The Trump administration blocked this effort because most of these funds would have been made available to countries outside of the low-income brackets, which did not need them.⁷ The administration also opposed funding that would eventually go to Iran and Venezuela.

The constraints of the international system appear to have been the biggest check on Trump's potential antagonism towards the IMF. Its president, Christine Lagarde, mused in 2017 that she could imagine IMF headquarters moving to Beijing by 2027, with the implication that should the US withdraw from the IMF, China was waiting in the wings.⁸ IMF voting rules also heavily favor the US, which controls a 16.5% voting share. Since decisions require approval from 85% of voting shares, the United States holds a *de facto* veto over many IMF decisions, and this in turn helps avoid antagonism

With respect to the International Criminal Court (ICC), unlike the Obama administration's approach to the ICC which included tacit support and even behind-the-scenes assistance, Trump and his team took unprecedented, scorched-earth antagonistic steps. In 2019, the US denied Fatou Bensouda, the ICC Chief Prosecutor, a US visa, though this was largely symbolic since she could still visit and address the UN General Assembly. In 2020, however, the US placed Bensouda and another ICC official on a State Department sanctions list that had previously been reserved for terrorists and narco-traffickers. The sanctions were harsh, resulting in the freezing of the targets' bank accounts and credit cards, and the move was globally criticized as a naked use of power to antagonize the Court.⁹ Despite domestic opposition and international consternation, the US also withdrew from the UN Human Rights Council. The US courts, however, issued an injunction against Trump's executive order on the grounds that it limited free speech. The Biden administration rejoined the UN HRC and removed the ICC sanctions, though it remains opposed to ICC probes in Afghanistan and Palestine.

Trump took several strong steps against Chinese human rights abuses, sanctioning several companies and individuals for their participation in oppressing Uighurs in Xinjiang Province. The US also revoked Hong Kong's "special status," a move designed to counter Chinese crackdowns on democracy. Both bipartisan moves originated in Congress, where domestic constraints forced the President to take action on these egregious human rights violations.

With regards to the World Health Organization and global health in general, the Trump Administration initially took antagonistic steps but then backed down. In early 2018, the Trump Administration surprised global health officials by recommending that Congress cut funding for Ebola preparedness and prevention, even as the disease was showing signs of resurgence. Shortly thereafter, Trump rescinded the budget cuts, obviating the need for Congress to decide on whether to keep the funding.¹⁰ The Administration had a brief spat with the WHO over breastfeeding recommendations, which Trump eventually denied starting and did not pursue.¹¹

COVID-19 triggered the largest battle between Trump and the WHO, as Trump accused the WHO of shielding China from scrutiny about the origins of the virus. He suspended funding to the Organization, issued a lengthy list of demands, and then promptly announced plans for a US withdrawal. However, Congress - albeit the 116th Congress - provided an unexpected check on Trump's efforts. That year, both chambers passed a resolution requiring a one-year waiting period before withdrawing from the WHO and paying any outstanding funding promises. Under President Biden, the US remains part of WHO.

U.S. Security, NATO, and Other military-oriented institutions

NATO

Trump campaigned on the obsolescence of the Atlantic alliance and the failure of European countries to pay their fair share. As Stanley R. Sloan chronicles in his contribution to the online collection of essays in this series, Trump openly questioned whether the United States would honor its collective defense obligations.¹² As president he continued this grumbling, but with waning intensity. By the end of 2020, the complaints had largely subsided, as both the United States and Europe *increased* their monetary contributions to NATO.

Both domestic political constraints and the international system explain why few threats against NATO under Trump materialized. On the domestic side, “defenders of the alliance [came] out of the woodwork, especially in the US Congress,” according to Charles Kupchan, who provides myriad examples of how domestic political actors defended the value of NATO, constraining President Trump's worst impulses.

There [was] virtually no support—in his own administration, among the American public, or in Congress— for taking a wrecking ball to NATO. Even as Trump cycles through foreign policy advisers of various ideological persuasions, they are all competent enough to understand the abiding strategic value of NATO. The electorate similarly knows better than Trump. ...

Congress, though currently a wasteland when it comes to cooperation across the aisle, has responded to Trump's NATO-phobia by becoming a bipartisan cheerleading squad for the alliance.¹³

As Susan Colborn notes in her essay in this volume, Trump's anti-NATO rhetoric found little traction with the electorate, too.

On the international side, NATO's value and the danger it counters provided constraints on any significant pullback. The presence of Russia as a strategic rival made clear the consequences of weakened commitments. Only a few years removed from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it was abundantly clear that Russia would happily step into any void left by the United States. Defense spending among NATO allies naturally increased as "they [reassessed] their presumption that Western Europe is safe from outside threats."¹⁴ Quarrels over burden-sharing within NATO have been commonplace throughout its history, and will likely continue. As we argued in our original piece, "the Trump administration ... [found] it in their own interests to maintain many existing elements of US foreign policy."

U.S. Military Deployments

In his 2019 State of the Union speech, Trump claimed that he would be proactive in bringing troops home. As one commentator put it, "But after nearly three years in office, Trump's promised retrenchment has yet to materialize. The president hasn't meaningfully altered the US global military footprint he inherited from President Barack Obama."¹⁵ Data from the Defense Manpower Data Center shows that overseas deployments remained relatively flat during this period (and are more so if one factors deployments in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan which the Trump administration stopped reporting in December 2017).¹⁶

Nor has Trump shifted the costly burden of defending US allies. To the contrary, he loaded even greater military responsibilities on the United States, while either ramping up or maintaining US involvement in the conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere."¹⁷ Trump also claimed that he would invest more in the military after the Obama administration had allegedly decimated spending. Unsurprisingly, military spending remained relatively flat.¹⁸

Trump's whiplash approach to drawing down troops and then reversing his decision characterized most of his administration's tenure. In both Syria and Afghanistan, Trump made sudden announcements of withdrawal, only to later reverse course. These efforts were repeatedly stymied by bipartisan Congressional opposition to dramatic changes. Congress used a number of legislative vehicles, including mandating that such efforts be certified as not negatively impacting US national security. Coupled with little in the way of a Trump administration strategy and a lack of interagency coordination, the president's efforts fell short of his promises.¹⁹

International Trade Policy

Our arguments found partial support in the area of international trade policy. Trump opened up a multi-front trade war with virtually all major trading partners. The ensuing foreign retaliation, as we predicted, targeted geographic areas in the US with the goal of maximizing Trump's political pain.

The major trade policy changes were less consistent with our predictions because we expected Trump and the Republican Party to engage in “backwards induction” by recognizing the consequences of a widespread trade war and therefore choosing not to start one in the first place. Analyzing the 2018 midterm elections, researchers estimate that the trade war cost Trump approximately five seats in the House of Representatives.²⁰ We incorrectly anticipated that this type of cost – stemming from international and domestic constraints – would dissuade Trump from starting a trade war. Congressional pushback against the trade war and industry opposition did materialize, but it failed to fully constrain Trump. All told, Trump had relatively free reign to conduct an unsuccessful trade war. This may have been due to the fact that over time even more aspects of trade policy have been delegated by Congress to the president, thus eroding constraints on the executive.

Ironically, even with the most significant trade war in over three decades, the US trade deficit *grew* slightly. US exports and imports remained relatively stable until the pandemic hit in 2020.²¹ While the COVID-19 pandemic clearly had a tremendous effect on global trade, Trump's trade war did not achieve its main goals of shifting the US balance of trade. Additionally, Congress passed the USMCA (or the “New NAFTA”) by substantial bipartisan margins. In terms of its substance, the USMCA drew heavily from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, an Obama-era agreement that Trump left in his first year in office.

However, the United States missed opportunities, as China proved willing to forge ahead with the US on the sidelines. In late 2020, most of the largest Asian economies signed onto the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. President Biden signaled interest in re-engaging with partner countries in Asia, but so far has not made any progress towards joining the Comprehensive Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (the renamed TPP).

Immigration

The Trump administration's efforts on immigration policy were probably the most contentious of any policy area. While many of these efforts were ultimately thwarted, they nonetheless were disruptive. The US court system provided the largest check, even if it allowed some policies to proceed. These checks came in several forms: judicial rebukes based on the policies themselves, and rebukes based on various procedural mistakes by Trump.

The ‘Muslim travel ban’ went through a series of transformations with a string of judicial rebukes. The policy came before the Supreme Court several times. Ultimately, in mid-2018, the Court upheld the policy based on the administration’s claim that travelers from these countries were a security threat. The five-justice majority decision argued that the executive branch has the right to set policies pertaining to national security.²² Upon taking office, Biden immediately rescinded this policy.

Trump also targeted the Obama administration’s 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy. While it was able to implement various restrictions in and tried to circumvent a range of legal decisions that prevented Trump from closing the program down, DACA remains in place. In June of 2020, the Supreme Court ruled that the administration’s termination of the program was judicially reviewable and violated the Administrative Procedures Act due to its “arbitrary and capricious manner.”²³ In December of 2020 a Federal judge ordered the administration to begin allowing new applicants to the program.

Visas

Trump also targeted the various visa programs for the entry of foreign workers. The three main visa programs are the H-1B (specialty occupations like in technology), H-2A (temporary agricultural workers), and H-2B (temporary non-agricultural workers). Throughout the majority of Trump’s tenure, all of these programs had similar or even higher levels of approved petitions.²⁴ The only exception occurred in 2020 when, as discussed below, Trump began to especially focus on decreasing H-2B visas.²⁵

The Trump administration tried a variety of ways to reduce the ability of US firms to use H-1B visas. He faced strong pushback from companies relying on the program for technical talent that is in short supply from American workers.²⁶ Trump’s H-1B efforts also faced substantial judicial push-back. For example, in order to redirect firms towards domestic labor, the administration tried to substantially increase the required wages of H-1B visa holders. Court challenges led to a string of losses, in part due again to violations of the Administration Procedures Act. Ultimately, the Biden administration stopped defending the rule changes in court.²⁷

The Trump administration’s approach to the H-2A visa program also sparked resistance. At one point, the administration halted a biannual survey of wages with the expectation that this act would lead to pay decreases for H-2A holders. A range of actors opposed this effort and faced challenges in court.²⁸ Supported by agricultural producers, the Trump administration took a different tact and simply froze wages.²⁹ The Biden administration quickly rolled back these proposed rules.³⁰

H-2B visas for non-agricultural temporary workers in fact grew under Trump. In 2017, he expanded the program, which was immediately followed by an expanded request from Trump’s

hotel properties.³¹ However, in 2020 the Trump administration tried both to expand the program³² and also to reduce it.³³ As with other visa programs, corporations and organizations like the US Chamber of Commerce opposed restrictions on H-2B visas.³⁴

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration tried to prevent foreign students who were studying at US universities from being able to remain in the US if their schools were holding classes online. Essentially, their visa status would be revoked if they did not either leave the country or transfer to an institution offering in-person classes. Harvard University and MIT initiated a lawsuit, later joined by universities across the country, challenging the rule in federal court. The Trump administration reversed course.

Of course, immigration policy does not exist in a vacuum, and powerful international economic forces are important. For example, research suggests that restrictions on H-1B's will simply lead to more off-shoring of work.³⁵ This trend could even accelerate since many firms gained substantial remote work experience during the pandemic.

Border Restrictions and the Wall

Perhaps the most symbolic piece of the Trump administration is “the Wall.” Trump repeatedly asserted that Mexico would pay for the wall, which, of course, it did not. Furthermore, Congress introduced substantial barriers to its funding, forcing the administration to use other fiscal accounts (like military construction and US Treasury forfeiture accounts). A 2020 bi-partisan spending bill included money for the wall. Most of the construction progress has been made in terms of rebuilding or enhancing existing barriers rather than new construction.³⁶

Despite the Wall being largely a flop, the Trump administration was successful in implementing restrictions targeting migration from Mexico and Central America. These included changes to asylum policies that made it difficult or impossible to qualify, as well as requirements that asylum seekers remain abroad while their cases were heard. The administration also stepped up interior enforcement by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency.³⁷ While some municipalities pushed back on these efforts, the numbers of non-criminal arrests increased during the Trump administration until the COVID-19 crisis. The Trump administration notoriously pursued deplorable tactics aimed at deterring migration, such as the separation of families.

The Future

Trump's claims to be leading an ‘America First’ foreign policy and the policy outcomes from his administration were not consistent. While Trump was, by and large, unable to change US foreign policy in terms of resources and policies, the tenor of his administration differed radically from that of previous ones and was often poisonous to American interests.

While Trump was unable to dismantle and destroy many of the institutions that play a prominent role in international relations, those institutions did face challenges. Biden's administration may seek to restore their place in American diplomacy. But many international institutions need reforms in order to adapt to global changes. China is now attempting to displace the US in many institutions that undergird the liberal international order. Were China just another large capitalist democracy this would cause problems, but given its state-led economy and its autocratic regime, the problems are profound. During the Cold War, institutions containing both the US and USSR were often hamstrung. Chinese engagement in these institutions may however spur US re-engagement in order to avoid displacement.

On the domestic front, we expect the constraints that bound Trump to also operate for Biden. In Trump's case the constraints operated to prevent more of a turn to America First policies. As notes, the US bureaucracy, Congress, the courts, the media, and public opinion to some extent blocked Trump's pursuit of retrenchment. This was an unusual position; in most administrations since World War II, the executive branch has been more internationalist than most other domestic actors. Domestic pressure *against* more global engagement, more multilateralism, more military and foreign-aid spending has been predominant in the past. We expect a return to this posture. The Biden administration, while pursuing internationalist policies, will need to tailor that engagement to ensure better and fairer outcomes for the median US voter. Openness to trade, immigration, and foreign investment will need to be tempered, since those areas have redistributive effects within society. Asserting more demands for improving the treatment of labor, the environment, human rights, and other regulatory priorities in agreements with other countries in exchange for access to the US market will be important. Conditional openness is likely to be a robust part of Biden's foreign policy.

Much of our analysis considers the role of domestic and international institutions. Further scholarship on the design of these institutions is warranted. For international institutions, the Trump presidency brought a number of questions to the fore. For example, how can escape and exit clauses³⁸ be specifically designed to maintain international cooperation while facilitating the participation of various countries in the first place. How much influence should powerful countries, like the United States, have in these organizations? While allowing a great power to occupy an influential role in an institution can increase that power's incentives to meaningfully engage, it can also disincentivize other countries. Designing institutions to deal with this fundamental tradeoff remains important.

Domestically, scholars and policymakers must consider a number of questions around institutional design. Some of these are more pertinent to purely domestic issues, like rule of law and corruption, which is important given Trump's disregard of previous rules and norms.³⁹ But others bear more directly on foreign policy. The relative roles of Congress and the presidency in

shaping American foreign policy remain contested. For example, the party out of power always laments presidential reliance on Executive Orders. These orders are used to circumvent constraints, and yet can be undone by the next administration. Can American political institutions be established that appropriately limit this dynamic and provide more consistency and credibility to American foreign policy? If not, the US may become more inconstant than ever. Its domestic politics are polarized between two similarly electoral sized groups that may alternate in office. In this situation, it is not clear how US foreign policy, and its threats and promises, can be credible.

Another issue is the relative role of interests and norms. Trump challenged and broke a number of norms in both domestic and foreign politics. We have focused in this chapter on policy changes because we believe them to be very important; even so, norms are also important. Trump and his administration have criticized and violated many long-standing norms, which has been and will continue to be costly to the US. American soft power has been hurt. Other countries can point to Trump's words and behavior to justify their norm-breaking, and America's ability to name and shame others has been diminished. On the normative side, the Trump administration has had a sizable negative impact. Can these norms be reconstructed for the changed world we inhabit?

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¹ A longer version of this chapter was published online. See Stephen Chaudoin, Helen V. Milner, and Dustin Tingley, "America First" Meets Liberal Internationalism," ed. Diane Labrosse, H-Diplo/ISSF Policy Series, (5 March 2021), <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/PS2021-11.pdf>. We would like to thank Tom Cunningham for research assistance and David Baldwin, Robert Jervis, Robert Keohane, Colin Chia, Anne Jamison, Nikhil Kalyanpur, and Paul Poast for comments on the previous long form chapter.

² Chaudoin, Milner, and Tingley “A Liberal International American Foreign Policy? Maybe Down but Not Out,” in Robert Jervis, Francis J. Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse, eds., *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018): 61-97.

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