

POLICY *focus*

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT

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From America First to America Last?

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What You Should Know

President Trump will leave U.S. foreign policy in far better shape than he found it. By putting America's interests first, Trump during his four years in the White House steered the U.S., and the world, toward a more secure, enlightened and free 21st century.

This meant tackling huge obstacles, even before the coronavirus pandemic arrived from China in 2020. When Trump took office in 2017, U.S. foreign policy was a mess of compounding fiascos. President Obama had spent the previous eight years apologizing for America and downsizing it as a world power. In this scheme, America operated less as the leader of the free world than as a large cog in a global collective. It was a foreign policy of appeasement and retreat, debilitating to America and emboldening to our enemies.

Trump changed that trajectory. He stood up unapologetically for America and began rebuilding a hollowed-out American military. He forced a long overdue and urgently needed recognition of the rapidly rising dangers posed by China. He pulled out of deals damaging to America and dangerous to our allies, and sought arrangements better aligned with reality and American interests, notably the Abraham Accords in the Middle East.

When Joe Biden takes office, he plans to revert to many of the policies and personnel of the Obama administration, in which he served as vice president. The troubling prospect is a swing from a U.S. presidency that put America first, to a presidency likely to put America last—or near enough.

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Why It Matters

If Biden scraps Trump's gains and reverts to Obama-style policies of appeasement and reliance on feckless multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, it will spell dark times ahead for America, and the world.

- **Facing Down the Threat of China:** Beijing on many fronts has been drastically accelerating its drive to subvert and supplant America as the world's leading power. Trump has awakened Americans and the world to the dangers, and launched a comprehensive campaign, via diplomacy, commerce and defense, to push back. Big questions hang over whether a Biden administration will find the wisdom and backbone to stand up to Beijing.
- **Winning the War on Terror:** While President Obama may have ordered the killing of Osama Bin Laden, it was the Trump Administration that successfully brokered peace deals in the Middle East, supporting our ally Israel, evicting ISIS from its "caliphate" and thwarting Tehran's sponsorship of terrorism. We should not reverse course.
- **No Replacement for American Leadership:** Since victory in World War II, America has served as leader of the free world, fostering an era of relative peace and rising prosperity around the globe. If America falters, there is no backup, no equivalent democratic superpower waiting in the wings.

More Information

Putting America first does not mean that only America matters. American interests include the defense of liberty and justice, American values that have brought great benefits not only at home, but to many parts of the globe. And while we all know that freedom isn't free, there are times when it needs particularly vigorous defending. That was the thrust of Trump's foreign policy, and in his quest to make America great again, Trump was—whether he said it or not—reasserting America's role as leader and bulwark of the free world.

That might sound weirdly at odds with Trump's tendency to sweet talk dictators, including on occasion Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and North Korea's Kim Jong Un. Invariably, this led to scandalized charges in the media that he had an affinity for such thugs. But it is important in sizing up Trump's foreign policy to pay attention not solely to what he said, but what he did—which usually amounted to variations on President Theodore Roosevelt's "walk softly and carry a big stick."

An emblematic moment, early in Trump's presidency, came at a dinner he hosted in 2017 for Xi at Mar-a-Lago. Over a dessert of chocolate cake, Trump informed Xi that he had just ordered the launch of 59 Tomahawk missiles targeting chemical weapons facilities in Syria. That strike

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was a clear departure from Obama’s vanishing red lines a few years earlier, in which Obama threatened military action to stop the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons, but did nothing. Mentioning this in person to China’s tyrant—as he chowed down on his cake—was a warning not to mess with the United States.

Major Foreign Policy Achievements

Trump’s biggest achievements in foreign policy required stepping away from multilateral groupthink and entrenched policy to take an unblinkered look at what America should or could do, first in its own interest, but also, as it happened to the benefit of the wider world.

China: Sounding the Alarm

Trump changed the world’s perception of China, awakening Americans and America’s allies to **the soaring perils posed by China’s globally ambitious communist regime**. Highlighting the role of China’s government in trade that masqueraded as private, Trump pushed back against allowing Chinese firms such as Huawei and ZTE to entwine themselves with U.S. infrastructure. He called out China’s predatory trade practices, demanded remedies, and publicized the security risks of relying on China for critical goods. This message resonated profoundly during the early months of the pandemic, when China, having captured most of the world market in pharmaceutical manufacturing, threatened to withhold critical supplies and plunge the U.S. into the “mighty sea of coronavirus.”

Trump brought into his administration officials such as Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, and National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien, who have done invaluable work in illuminating everything from China’s human rights abuses to its vast networks of commercial and military espionage, its infiltration of American universities, its United Front work to plunder and undermine America, and its ambitions to dominate the 21st century world order. When China infected the world with the coronavirus, and then tried to blame it on the U.S., Trump pushed back, underscoring China’s responsibility for the pandemic, and withdrawing the U.S. from the World Health Organization, which had been complicit in China’s initial coverup.

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Today, thanks in great part to Trump’s efforts, there is bipartisan agreement that China is the leading threat to America and a liberal world order. That considerable problem is far from solved, but it is at least widely perceived and much better understood. This is a huge shift, after almost half a century—going back to President Nixon’s 1972 rapprochement with Mao—of America leading the way on global engagement, trade and trust in China. As recently as 2016, the Obama administration was cordially inviting China to take part in major U.S.-hosted Naval exercises in the Pacific. (In 2018, Trump scrapped that, too.)

The Middle East

Here, again, Trump inherited from Obama a colossal mess. Iran was on the rise, stirring up chaos and carnage in the region, fresh from an Obama-legacy nuclear deal that left terror-

sponsoring Tehran flush with cash, but did not actually block its path to the bomb. The 2011 Arab Spring had deteriorated into multiple disasters, including terrorist-infested anarchy following Obama’s leading-from-behind in Libya, and the rise of ISIS (initially dismissed by Obama as the “JV team” of terrorism) with its “caliphate” headquartered in Syria. American would-be peacemakers were preoccupied, as usual, with the farcical “peace process” in which the Palestinians perpetually refused to negotiate in good faith a lasting peace with Israel.

Trump reframed the priorities. By changing the U.S. rules of engagement, he got rid of the ISIS “caliphate.” He withdrew the U.S. from the Iran nuclear deal, which was enriching Iran without stopping its path to the bomb. He resumed U.S. pressure choking Tehran’s money flows. He threw strong support behind Israel, a natural ally of the U.S. and the only democracy in the Middle East. Along with moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, Trump recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights—geographically vital to Israel’s defense. He then bypassed the intransigent Palestinians, to pursue peace in the Middle East by leveraging the shared interests of Arab nations and Israel in standing up to Iran, and benefiting from mutual trade. That led in 2020 to the groundbreaking Abraham Accords, brokered by the Trump administration, a realignment and foundation of a coalition in which to date the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco have agreed to recognize Israel, and the Saudis have begun allowing Israeli overflights.

The UN, NATO, and Multilateral Deals

A common criticism of Trump’s America First policy is that he had no respect for multilateral agreements. Not true. Trump was not opposed to such deals per se. He was opposed to multilateral deals that failed to deliver on important promises, or were downright damaging or dangerous to America.

The United Nations. Noble though many UN agencies and initiatives might sound, in practice the **UN is an opaque and largely unaccountable system** that lends itself to manipulation by some of the worst of its 193 member states, while the U.S. provides legitimacy and billions in funding. Trump refused, quite rightly, to legitimize and bankroll some of the most morally perverse and anti-American arms of the UN, withdrawing the U.S. from the China-manipulated World Health Organization (WHO), defunding the terrorist-sustaining Palestinian relief agency (UNRWA), pulling out of the dictator-friendly Human Rights Council, and leaving the incorrigibly anti-Israel UNESCO (as Reagan did in the 1980s).

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NATO. This is a great example of how, despite howls of protest from the media, Trump’s America First approach worked out well for all (except Russia). During the Cold War, NATO was the vital alliance confronting the Soviet Union, and today it still matters as an important deterrent to Russia. But when Trump took office, most European NATO members were not honoring their commitments to spend at least 2 percent of their gross domestic product on defense. Instead, they were piggybacking on U.S. taxpayers, while skimping on their

own defenses. Trump shocked European leaders by demanding they live up to their NATO commitments. For this he was reviled in the press, as recklessly endangering NATO, to the benefit of Russia. As it worked out, however, he kept America in NATO, and thanks to his shocking demands, a number of delinquent European NATO members began living up to their word on defense spending—on balance, a greater deterrent to Russia.

The Iran Nuclear Deal. This Obama-legacy deal, reached in 2015, was so favorable to Iran, and so bad for America (and existentially dangerous to Israel) that Obama knew the Senate would refuse to ratify it as a treaty. Bypassing the U.S. constitutional process, Obama instead rushed the deal to the UN Security Council, where Russia and China hold permanent seats. The Council promptly approved the deal, effectively giving Russia and China a greater say than U.S. lawmakers over U.S. foreign policy. When Trump withdrew America from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, he did the right thing, freeing America to seek genuine remedies to Iran’s threats, rather than rely on a fatally flawed paper deal that did no such thing.

The Paris Agreement on Climate. This was another Obama-era deal so costly for America (and dubious in its potential effects on climate) that Obama did not submit it as a treaty to the Senate. Obama’s administration signed onto it on terms that imposed draconian near-term costs to the U.S., while deferring for more than a decade any constraints on China. When Trump withdrew the U.S. from this deal in 2017, he accurately described it as: “less about climate and more about other countries gaining a financial advantage over the United States.”

Will Biden Put America Last?

If Joe Biden builds on Trump’s foreign policy achievements, America will be well-positioned to emerge from the 2020 pandemic with better times ahead. But Biden’s platform is full of talk about charting “a fundamentally different course,” which in its particulars sounds disturbingly similar to the America-Last trajectory of the Obama administration. Biden is recruiting for his foreign policy team a roster of former Obama-era officials who were instrumental in crafting the worst of Obama’s policies. Biden proposes to take America back into the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate agreement, and rely much more heavily on the UN, including an immediate U.S. return to the (China-manipulated) World Health Organization.

It’s still unclear to what extent Biden might reverse Trump’s pushback against China, defaulting to engagement and appeasement; or sabotage the Abraham Accords in the Middle East by reentering the Iran nuclear deal, thus harming Israel and strengthening Iran. But the record of Biden and his team does not bode well. The windy priorities in Biden’s foreign policy platform to “Elevate Diplomacy” and “Restore and Reimagine Partnerships” suggest a return of U.S. foreign policy to the realms of multilateral mush, advantageous to America’s most opportunistic enemies, and debilitating to America. Though let’s hope not.

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What You Can Do

Share Your Pride In America

There is no country on earth that stands as a greater testament to the value of freedom and importance of defending it. **Teach your children**, tell your neighbors and demand of your politicians that their priorities should be to protect, preserve and defend the rights and freedoms of America.

Get Informed

- **State Department: China's Coercive Tactics Abroad**
- **U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission**
- **State Department, Commission on Unalienable Rights**
- **American Greatness**

Talk to Your Friends

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

Become a Leader in the Community

Get a group together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

Remain Engaged Politically

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

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ABOUT INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

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