

The Promise and Peril of President Trump's America First Foreign Policy

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As he sat in prison in 1930, at the opening of a fateful decade, the Italian anti-fascist Antonio Gramsci wrote: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”

The world is now in a Gramscian interregnum. The old order—Pax Americana—is breaking down. Electorates across the West are in revolt as the industrial era’s social contract has given way to the socio-economic insecurity of the digital age and the hollowing out of the middle class. Decades of strategic overreach and hyperglobalization have cracked the bipartisan consensus behind liberal internationalism that long guided U.S. statecraft. Waves of immigration have sparked an angry ethno-nationalism that advantages ideological extremes. Meanwhile, power in the international system is shifting from West to East and North to South, undermining a global order that rested on the West’s material and ideological primacy.

It is in this context that President Trump could be the agent of change that is needed. His America First brand of statecraft breaks decisively from the liberal internationalist mold that has shaped the grand strategy of successive administrations since World War II. But though that mold may well need to be shattered, it will also need to be replaced. Trump must pursue change that is radical but responsible, reforming the world that America made rather than merely destroying it. Judging by the administration's first month, there is quite considerable cause for concern that Trump will quite handily fulfill his mandate to be a demolition man, but fall well short of his duty to be the architect of the international order that comes next. The task before Congress, the courts, the media, and the American people is to help ensure that the promise of America First prevails over its peril.

THE PROMISE OF AMERICA FIRST

Trump's America First foreign policy finds few supporters among the foreign policy establishment, but it offers distinct advantages. His transactional and pragmatic engagement with adversaries may well help tame mounting geopolitical rivalry. Preparing a diplomatic push to end Russia's war against Ukraine is pragmatism, not capitulation; the death and destruction need to stop. Trump was smart to invite Xi Jinping to his inauguration; if he can eventually sit down with Xi, cut a trade deal, and ease rising geopolitical tensions, he will advance the economic as well as strategic interests of the United States. Trump appears ready to open negotiations with Iran. Now that Israel has weakened Tehran and pummeled its proxies in the Middle East, a diplomatic breakthrough may be achievable. Should Trump succeed in lowering the temperature with adversaries, he will make the world a safer place while scaling back the nation's onerous commitments abroad, thereby easing the chronic strategic overreach that has led Americans to turn inward.

Trump also understands that globalization has left many workers behind, and that open trade has benefited far too few Americans; he is appropriately looking to level the commercial playing field. He is heading in the right direction by seeking a solution to illegal immigration, responding to the clamor of an electorate that knows full well that the country lacks a functioning immigration system. And Trump will be doing the nation a service if he can downsize the federal government, make it more efficient, and help reduce the national debt.

More pragmatism and less ideology, more restraint and fewer wars, more focus on solving problems at home and less on defending democracy abroad, more government efficiency and less waste—these strategic shifts should serve the United States well as it seeks to manage a world of growing disarray, diffusing power, and stark political diversity. Trump's statecraft is in these respects an appropriate response to a changing world and a changing America.

THE PERIL OF AMERICA FIRST

Yet even if Trump's America First foreign policy has considerable promise, it is also fraught with risk. His transactional approach to diplomacy could morph into a stiff-necked unilateralism that shatters alliances and undermines collective efforts where they are needed. His effort to limit U.S. entanglements abroad could lead to U.S. underreach, leaving dangerous vacuums of power. His reluctance to promote democracy overseas could shade into disregard for democratic norms at home, potentially resulting in irreversible damage to the nation's representative institutions. And in his determination to shake up the political

establishment, Trump could break the U.S. government rather than reform it. A broken federal government will be in no shape to fix a broken America or a broken world. In short, Trump's America First strategy could easily descend into excess and incoherence—and is quickly headed in that direction.

Trump's pragmatic readiness to engage adversaries is a welcome shift, but now the hazard lies on the other side—that Trump will embrace a self-defeating unilateralism and shun alliances and other collective efforts; America First is becoming America Alone. Unilateralism won't work in today's world; no nation can opt out of a globe that has grown irreversibly interdependent. Countering aggression, managing international commerce, arresting global warming, preventing nuclear proliferation, regulating the development and deployment of AI—these are only a few of the shared challenges that necessitate international teamwork. If the United States walks away from collective effort, others will do the same. And allies don't diminish U.S. power; they augment it.

Nonetheless, Trump has again withdrawn from the Paris Climate agreement and the World Health Organization. He is demeaning allies and undermining NATO. Trump's unilateralist threats to use economic coercion to annex Canada and military coercion to take control of the Panama Canal and Greenland are, simply put, bizarre. Trump's enthusiasm for tariffs is another worrying plank of his unilateralist agenda. Modest and selective tariffs could do some good, protecting sensitive technological sectors, bringing home a few manufacturing jobs, and pressuring foreign governments to provide U.S. goods with better market access.

Yet if Trump puts up the high tariff walls that he is envisaging, he could well spark a trade war that wreaks havoc on international trade and global prosperity and inflames geopolitical tensions. Tariff barriers would also hurt, not help, America's working families by increasing the cost of consumer goods while failing to turn the United States back into the "manufacturing powerhouse" that Trump has promised. Largely as a consequence of automation, some 80 percent of the U.S. workforce is already employed in the service sector; most of those workers are not returning to the production line.

Trump is right that the United States tends to overreach abroad, but now the risk ahead is underreach; the United States needs not an isolationist retreat, but instead a middle ground between doing too much and doing too little. Ukraine will be an early test. Trump is right to try to end the conflict; a war that drags on indefinitely could eventually turn Ukraine into a failed state. But even though Russia will almost certainly retain, at least for now, the 20 percent of Ukraine it currently occupies, Washington must ensure that the remaining 80 percent is a success story. To leave Ukraine indefensible and permanently subject to Moscow's predation and coercion would be to hand a victory not only to Russia, but to China, Iran, and North Korea, all of which are backing Russian aggression.

Trump appears likely to either overdo or underdo China. He's a hawk when it comes to trade but could well balk at the risks of a military confrontation, especially over Taiwan. In the past he has demanded that Taiwan pay for U.S. "protection," claimed that it had "stolen" America's semiconductor industry, and equivocated about defending the island. The responsible path is to undertake cautious but constructive engagement, aiming to rebalance trade, ratchet down geopolitical tension, and carve out a working relationship on issues ranging from technological competition to global health—all while preserving a stable status quo on Taiwan.

Ideological hubris has often pushed U.S. statecraft off course, and Trump exhibits due caution toward the overzealous promotion of democracy abroad. He has correctly traced American overreach in the Middle East to the “dangerous idea that we could make Western democracies out of countries that had no experience or interest in becoming a Western democracy.”

Yet Trump could well end up pairing this tolerance of political diversity abroad with efforts to compromise liberal democracy at home. Indeed, he has already shown a worrying disdain for the democratic norms that have long anchored the nation’s political life. Democracy is in recession in all quarters of the globe, including in the West, where political centrism has been steadily losing ground to illiberal populism. If that trend is to be reversed, the United States needs to get its own house in order and demonstrate to the rest of the world that democratic governments can indeed deliver for their citizens and outperform the autocratic competition. At this historic inflection point, the trajectory of American democracy may well determine the trajectory of democracy around the world. If Trump contravenes the laws, norms, and practices that anchor republican government, he could do irreparable harm to the cause of democracy not just in the United States, but globally.

In a similar vein, even though Trump has a mandate to take on the political establishment and reform the U.S. government, he cannot afford to bring down the house. The status quo certainly deserves shaking up, yet Trump will need a functioning executive branch to make and implement policy. Substantive experts and diplomats are not subversive agents of the “deep state,” they are vital to making and executing effective policy and staffing the nation’s outposts abroad. Making foreign assistance more efficient and effective makes perfect sense. But gutting USAID and suspending aid has cut off the flow of vital humanitarian assistance, tarnished the nation’s image in many quarters of the globe, and created an opening for China and others to fill the gap. That is not putting America first.

UKRAINE: A CASE STUDY IN PROMISE AND PERIL

The Trump administration’s policy toward Ukraine amply illustrates both the promise and the peril of America First. Trump’s effort to end the war through direct engagement with Russia is long overdue. His February 12 phone call with Vladimir Putin and the subsequent meeting that took in Riyadh between U.S. and Russian officials are positive developments.

But even if U.S. policy is headed in a good direction, its broader execution has been flawed by incoherence and rookie mistakes. The Trump administration has frittered away leverage by making major concessions even before negotiations have begun. It has taken NATO membership for Ukraine off the table, counseled Ukraine to give up on reclaiming territory occupied by Russia, and already discussed the rekindling of economic ties between the United States and Russia. These are realistic outcomes—but they should be held in reserve and later deployed to entice Putin to make a deal. By calling President Volodymyr Zelensky a “dictator” and blaming Ukraine for the war, Trump undermines Kyiv; these are Moscow’s talking points, they should not be Washington’s. It is inappropriate to condition continued U.S. aid on Ukraine’s willingness to pledge to the United States some \$500 billion in revenue from the extraction of its natural resources. The United States should not charge for throwing a life preserver to a fellow democracy fighting for its life, nor deny Ukrainians the resources they will need to rebuild their country. Finally, Trump is

imperiling NATO through rhetoric and action that are eroding allied solidarity and prompting many Europeans to ask whether their decades-long strategic partnership with the United States is coming to an end.

It is not too late to get U.S. policy back on track. The Trump administration now needs to work with Ukraine and its NATO partners to forge a concrete plan for negotiating an end to the war. Once a coherent plan and a unified front have been forged, negotiations with Russia should proceed. Trump must understand that a bad deal is worse than no deal. That part of Ukraine that is still free must emerge as a sovereign, secure, and democratic nation. Anything short of that outcome would constitute a grievous defeat not just for Ukraine, but for the United States and the alliance of democracies that it still leads.

The task facing Americans, allies, and even foreign adversaries is to help ensure that the promise of Trump's second term prevails over its considerable peril. The work ahead will be to encourage Trump's better instincts, counter his more malign ones, and channel both into something resembling a coherent and constructive grand strategy.