



Perspectives in American Diplomacy

President Trump's administration may well be judged almost entirely upon its handling of the coronavirus pandemic. As of this writing, it is too soon to tell what that judgment will be. In recent days we have certainly seen a more brusque relationship between China and the US as a result.

But what of Trump's foreign policy more generally? Have the past four years of the Trump presidency been one of foreign policy success or failure?

Interestingly, the answer may be neither. Trump's major contribution to American foreign policy may be found in its upheaval of the status quo ante—an upheaval that may yield as many opportunities as it does dangers.

Two years ago, Henry Kissinger commented, "I think Trump may be one of those figures in history who appears from time to time to mark the end of an era and to force it to give up its old pretenses. It doesn't necessarily mean that he knows this, or that he is considering any great alternative. It could just be an accident."

Similarly, Tom McTague of the *Atlantic* interpreted Ryan Evans's term "Trumpportunities" to mean "the idea that, whether by accident or design, Trump creates chances to solve long-running international problems that a conventional leader would not."

Scholars have long noted the bipartisan consensus among the foreign policy establishment that existed before Trump, with some christening it "the Blob." The Blob's vision of a liberal international order rooted in global capitalism just seemed like common sense to many, but certain scholars, such as the "restrainers," had begun to ask why the vision so often led to foreign policy failure. A "reflexive do-somethingism," to use Susan Glasser's description, plus an acceptance of inertia in critical arenas, such as NATO, seemed to have led inexorably to debacles, such as the Libyan R2P operation and the lack of enforcement of the vaunted "red line" in Syria.

Trump certainly came into his four years determined not to follow the Blob and to cut loose as much of the Blob-ian foreign policy bureaucracy as he could. The mass resignations and firings at the US State Department in 2017—with very few of these empty positions subsequently filled—spoke volumes. “This is a president who ran against the foreign policy establishment pretty explicitly,” NSC spokesman Michael Anton told Glasser in 2017, “so I don’t think that it should surprise anyone that the foreign policy establishment isn’t supportive. It’s a sign he’s following through on what he said he would do.”

Tom Countryman, a senior State Department official, gave a speech upon the occasion of his abrupt firing in 2017 that was subsequently leaked to *Foreign Policy*. In it he asserted, “Despite similarities, a dog is not a cat, baseball is not football and diplomacy is not a business. Human rights are not a business and democracy most assuredly is not a business. . . . If our interaction with other countries is only a business transaction and not a partnership with allies and friends, we’ll lose that game.”

To the contrary, I'd suggest that the nature of foreign policy is, in fact, transactional. Foreign policy is still rooted in national interest and power. While we may use power for human rights aims, power is still the currency. Furthermore, it is critical in a democracy to make the case that the promotion of human rights, both in general and in specific cases, is in fact a furtherance of the national interest. Without attention to these two foundation stones, foreign policy is likely to go amiss.

One of the healthiest things that could have been done was to suggest—finally—to our NATO allies that if they did not meet their financial obligations, the US would not simply go on with business as usual. An alliance is absolutely transactional, though it can be strengthened by friendship and common values. Remove the two-way transaction, and the alliance falters despite common values.

A second healthy move was to call the Obama-era nuclear deal with Iran for what it was—a document not worth the paper it was written on. Paper agreements and pie-crust promises keep no one safe. The airstrike killing Qassim al-Soleimani, who reigned with blood and horror across Iran's "near abroad," was a needed display of hard power that pulled the Iranian regime back to a more realistic appraisal of the pros and cons of the current relationship between the two countries. Ironically, as one former British diplomat put it to McTague, "This has fundamentally changed the game and opens up the space for de-escalation."

A third move by the Trump administration, aborted by US domestic politics, was to suggest that in a world where the ascendant power is China, Russia should not be an enemy. Indeed, it will not be too much longer before the national interests of China and of Russia begin to clash. While Russia may never be a friend to the US, a long-term view would sense the obvious realignments to come and adjust accordingly.

A fourth move by the Trump administration—long overdue—was to put China on notice that the US would firmly defend its economic interests. While the US still possesses, arguably, the world's largest economy, that distinction may well fade with time. Using hard economic power now may delay the pain of readjustment to a new economic reality in the coming decades.

These may be four important “Trumpportunities.” Could there also be “Trumptastrophes”? Absolutely. The coronavirus pandemic and ensuing recession may be mishandled; it is too early to judge at this point. Afghanistan may turn into a viper's nest once again. The closeness to the Saudi regime may be deeply regretted one day. Rather than causing our allies to step up to the plate, Trump's hardball tactics may cause the final demise of NATO.

Whether Trump is reelected again this fall or not, the next president will no longer be locked into the Blob mindset because of what Trump wrought in his first four years. The debate over what should replace it should begin as expeditiously as possible.

Valerie M. Hudson taught at BYU for twenty-five years before moving to Texas A&M University, where she is a professor and holds the George H. W. Bush Chair in the Department of International Affairs at the Bush School of Government and Public Service and serves as director of the Program on Women, Peace, and Security. Hudson is cofounder of the WomanStats Project, which hosts the largest compilation of information on the status of women in the world. She is also coauthor of Bare Branches, Sex and World Peace, and The Hillary Doctrine, and her research has been funded by the National Science Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, and the US Department of Defense.

The Great Hollowing Out

By Robert R. King

After serving for twenty-five years as chief of staff to a US congressman from California, I was appointed as special envoy for North Korean human rights issues with the rank of ambassador in 2009. I spent over seven years at the US Department of State focusing attention on North Korea's abysmal human rights record, pressing for international action through the United Nations and other international organizations, and encouraging North Korea to improve the treatment of its own citizens.

My position as special envoy was created by Congress. It was adopted by unanimous consent in the US Senate and by a recorded vote of 415 to 0 in the House of Representatives. In this era of partisan politics, that is truly remarkable. That legislation was signed into law by President Trump three years ago, but still the president has not nominated a special envoy. The position has been vacant since I left in January 2017.

Unfortunately, the North Korea human rights special envoy is not the only key diplomatic position that is unfilled at the Department of State. Well over a third of the key leadership positions in the department are currently vacant. The twenty-eight undersecretaries and assistant secretaries of state play key roles in foreign policy leadership, and ten are currently vacant. They require Senate confirmation, and successors have not even been nominated. In addition, one post has a nominee who is not yet confirmed by the Senate. The areas without an assistant secretary include arms control, European affairs, international organizations, South Asia (Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Central Asia, Sri Lanka), the Western Hemisphere, and, not surprisingly, oceans, the environment, and science.

But senior-level vacancies are only a part of the problem. White House budget proposals have slashed funds for international programs over the last three years. Cuts were not as dramatic as the administration proposed, but there were serious reductions. Department of Defense spending is nineteen times what is spent on foreign affairs.

Our embassies abroad and the State Department in Washington, DC, have traditionally been staffed by experienced career Foreign Service and foreign policy professionals. These individuals have advanced degrees in foreign affairs and regional studies, are trained in diplomacy, and are taught other languages. They are informed in the complexities of modern foreign relations, have a variety of significant international experiences, and understand US laws and international norms. But in the last three years, ambassadors to key countries have increasingly been political appointees with little or no previous diplomatic experience. Career appointees are appointed as top diplomats in small and poor countries, while political appointees serve in the most important places.

A particularly insightful article in the *Atlantic* explained this trend: "Trump is not alone in appointing political donors with no relevant experience to ambassadorships in foreign capitals. All recent presidents have done so. Yet the problem is getting worse—as the cost of American presidential campaigns skyrockets, as wealthy Americans flex their muscles within the American political system, and as the selling of ambassadorships for cold, hard cash becomes more and more overt."

Increasingly these amateur ambassadors deal directly with the White House and largely ignore the expertise and advice of the State Department career officials in Washington, DC, and the experienced Foreign Service officers that staff the embassies. The most dramatic consequence of this was the Ukraine fiasco in 2019. The career State Department ambassador, who speaks Ukrainian and had served in the Foreign Service for three decades, was not kept informed about conversations between the US president and the newly elected president of Ukraine.

The most critical aspects of US policy toward Ukraine's new government were being

handled by Gordon Sondland, a real estate developer who was appointed as the US ambassador to the European Union because he contributed one million dollars to the Trump inaugural committee and whose official duties had nothing to do with Ukraine, as well as former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani, a personal attorney to the president with no foreign policy experience.

The impact of seeing two inexperienced neophytes dabbling in critical US policy on Ukraine certainly does not make the Foreign Service appear to be a career where education, experience, and judgment are important. The resulting impact on career officers is devastating.

The Ukraine fiasco is not the only incident of improperly appointed Foreign Service positions. While in Central Europe several months ago, I met up with a friend, fellow missionary, and Capitol Hill colleague. He was looking to leave the Foreign Service. My friend worked for a political appointee ambassador who knew nothing about the Central European country to which he had been appointed, and his only concern was to get the US president to meet with the leader of "his country" so that he personally could go to the White House. The meeting took place, but it was the wrong signal for US policy. The country involved was backsliding from the democratic principles it initially embraced after the Soviet occupation came to an end in 1990.

The expertise and knowledge that we have cultivated in the Foreign Service now play a decreasing role in shaping American foreign policy. For example, our nation developed a Foreign Service that played a key part in shaping the US role in the post-World War II world, but now, in this era of social media, the loudest voice rather than the most experienced voice is frequently the one that is heard. The voices of go-it-alone nationalism and isolationism are not just being heard *in* the White House; they are the loudest voices shouting *from* the White House.

Unless we can counteract this hollowing out of American diplomacy by providing the necessary funding for a robust foreign policy, cultivating a professional Foreign Service

of experienced and educated people, and taking full advantage of the wisdom and insight of foreign policy professionals, the future for United States foreign policy will not be bright.

Robert R. King received a BA in political science from BYU and was a participant in BYU's first study abroad program in Salzburg, Austria. He received a PhD from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He was assistant director of research at Radio Free Europe in Munich, Germany (1970-1977); served as a White House fellow (1977-1978); was chief of staff to Congressman Tom Lantos of California (1983-2008); and was staff director of the House Foreign Affairs Committee (2001-2009). He was confirmed by the US Senate as US special envoy for North Korean human rights issues (2009-2017) with the rank of ambassador. Since 2017 he has been senior advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and a nonresident fellow at the Korea Economic Institute, both in Washington, DC. Most recently, he was a visiting scholar at Stanford University (2019-2020).