

Fractured: Trump's Foreign Policy after Two Years

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The presidency of Donald Trump is the strangest act in American history; unprecedented in form, in style an endless sequence of improvisations and malapropisms.¹ But in substance there is continuity, probably much more than is customarily recognized. It is hard to recognize the continuity, amid the daily meltdowns (and biennial shutdowns), but it exists. In large measure Trump has been a Republican president, carrying out a Republican agenda. His attack on the regulatory agencies follows a Republican script. His call for a prodigious boost to military spending, combined with sharp cuts in taxes, has been the Republican program since the time of Ronald Reagan's presidency. His climate skepticism corresponds with that of Republican leaders in Congress. On trade and immigration, Trump has departed most radically from Bush Republicanism, but even in that regard Trump's policies harken back to older traditions in the Grand Old Party. He is different in character and temperament from every Republican predecessor as president, yet has attached himself to much of the traditional Republican program.²

It is in foreign policy, the subject of this essay, where Trump's role has been most disorienting, his performance 'up-ending' in substance and method. At one level, he has broken from a host of establishment verities in foreign policy. He has a set of convictions about how the world works that is totally contrary to that of 'the Blob,' the felicitous term coined by Obama aide Benjamin Rhodes for the Washington establishment and commentariat. This disjunction between presidential outlook and establishment opinion is much more pronounced in rhetoric than in policy, but it is stark. Most notably, it exists not only between Trump and the commentariat but also between Trump and his national security team. For all of the changes that team has undergone in the first two years, that stark disparity, at least, has remained a constant. One

¹ Many thanks to Diane Labrosse for her expert help on this and other essays.

² I explore Trump's relation to the Republican Party in greater detail in David C. Hendrickson, "Behind America's New Nationalism" in Daniel S. Hamilton and Teija Tiilikainen, eds. *Domestic Determinants of Foreign Policy in the European Union and the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Transatlantic Relations and Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2018), 55-77.

would have to search the dim records of pampered European monarchs,³ rather than the annals of republican government, to find the relevant precedent. The United States has had plenty of bad presidents, but no mad kings.

In the following, I want to sketch Trump's distinctive view of foreign policy, show why it is at such odds with establishment thinking, and then assess the course of administration policy toward Russia, the Greater Middle East, and East Asia. To be neglected for reasons of space is the "troika of tyranny" that National Security Advisor John Bolton has identified in the western hemisphere, but the belligerent posture thus exhibited is of a piece with that elsewhere.⁴ Trump has a reputation as a 'peace president' among some observers (Justin Raimondo, Daniel McCarthy, and Leon Hadar), a position I do not share.⁵ Trump appears to me as a militarist seeking his opportunity; at a minimum, he has done little to arrest the course of militarism, and has more often encouraged than discouraged it. Though sometimes Trump leans the other way, his administration's larger record is the adoption of more belligerent policies toward Iran, China, Russia, and others. The spiral into potentially unconstrained Great Power competition, which had already been well advanced by previous administrations, has been hastened by Trump in its dangerous course.

The Trump Worldview

Trump's understanding of foreign policy is informed by a deep-seated belief that the United States has been greatly taken advantage of by the world. Commitments of support for which a price ought to have been attached carried no such price. He thinks that U.S. allies have been stiffing the United States, and wants them to 'pay up.' He believes past U.S. interventions in Iraq and Libya were a waste (while also claiming, more dubiously, that he criticized them before the event). The unfairness of the U.S. alliance system is marked not only in the disparate burdens shouldered by the respective parties for the common defense, but also in the trade surpluses run by the very nations (Germany, South Korea, and Japan) that are most dependent on U.S. military support. These were old themes for Trump. He had taken out newspaper ads in the 1980s complaining about America's allies, and he renewed the charge as president. Germany, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia were, in his first year, especially singled out as chisellers-in-chief.

Trump proclaimed his movement as an insurgent American nationalism that would always put 'America First,' as Patrick Buchanan did in his presidential bids in 1992 and 1996. Trump, however, did not counsel a reduction in military spending or a withdrawal from America's alliances, as did Buchanan, but rather saw the alliances as arrangements between a superpower protector and deadbeat dependents, who should pay up or

³ Thomas Jefferson to Governor John Langdon, "The Book of Kings," 5 March 1810, in Merrill Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1221-1222.

⁴ Elias Atienza, "The 'Troika of Tyranny' Is a Mistake," *The National Interest*, 1 November 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/%E2%80%98troika-tyranny%E2%80%99-mistake-35712>.

⁵ See, e.g., Justin Raimondo, "The War for the President's Mind," *antiwar.com*, 17 September 2018, <https://original.antiwar.com/justin/2018/09/16/the-war-for-the-presidents-mind/>; Daniel McCarthy, "Donald Trump is a Man of Peace—His Enemies Are a War Machine," *Spectator | USA*, 20 December 2018, <https://spectator.us/donald-trump-peace-war-machine/>; Leon Hadar, "Give Trump a Chance in the Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, 27 June 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/27/give-trump-a-chance-in-the-middle-east/>.

shove off. Despite various bows to traditional isolationist sentiment and behind-the-scenes complaining,⁶ Trump's larger program was anything but isolationist. His full-throated support for increased military spending (strongly supported in Congress by Republicans and Democrats alike) only made strategic sense on the assumption that the United States had to shore up its global military position. That position, however, is inextricably tied to the support of allies—that is, to the very nations that Trump excoriated as deadbeats. Trump, as it were, wants a U.S. military for exclusively American purposes, but the military he sought to upgrade with lavish subsidies has in fact been built for the protection of allies. If you were going to pare back the protection, you would want to decrease, not increase, the subsidies. But Trump did the opposite of that.

Conjoined, these two features of the Trump outlook—a fundamental rejection of the bargains previously underlying U.S. alliances, alongside an intensified bid for military superiority—left Trump with a conception of the democratic alliance that is indistinguishable from an empire of tribute. Trump suggested that cash payments from allies would do nicely, but in lieu of that he would accept allied purchases of U.S. military equipment. This was the symbolic essence of Trump's first foreign trip as president, to Saudi Arabia, where he announced (with false figures, as usual) \$110 billion in new arms sales. The bargain Trump envisioned—we protect you, in return for which you buy our arms and keep oil prices low—was actually not all that unusual in the Saudi context, but it was unusual (and highly disconcerting to the establishment) to see the entire U.S. world position in those terms. A U.S.-Saudi relationship previously filed under 'the great exception' became suddenly emblematic of the whole schmeer.

This situation presents many oddities. For one thing, it makes it very difficult to describe, at any given moment, 'the administration's outlook.' Trump has appointed people to senior national security positions who often do not share his outlook. This was obvious with respect to the people he brought into his administration in his first year (H.R. McMaster at the National Security Council, Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State, and James Mattis as Secretary of Defense), but it is also true of their successors (John Bolton, Mike Pompeo, and a person yet to be named). There is the tune the president sings, and the tune his advisors sing; they are often disharmonic. When has it ever happened that the Secretary of State has uttered, in the presence of other cabinet officials, that the president is a "f**king moron"? What previous Secretary of Defense said that the president he serves thinks at a fifth- or sixth-grade level?⁷

Trump thus presides over a national security establishment whose moral purpose and justification he has inverted and discombobulated. The establishment's conception of the national interest is firmly anchored in what they conceive to be moral principle; for them, the national interest can be served only by subordinating it to what Mattis called the "rules-based, international democratic order."⁸ But Trump obviously has little concern for "the rules" as such; he derides that as Clinton-speak or Obama-speak. So, too, under Trump the

⁶ Julian E. Barnes and Helene Cooper, "Trump Discussed Pulling U.S. from NATO, Aides Say amid New Concerns over Russia," *New York Times*, 14 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/us/politics/nato-president-trump.html>.

⁷ Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 225-26. Woodward's latest has arresting material on Trump's first year. The most useful detailing of the Trump record, written from a liberal internationalist perspective, is Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *The Empty Throne: America's Abdication of Global Leadership* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018).

⁸ Woodward, *Fear*, 219.

quality so much prized by the foreign policy establishment, credibility, is a gust in the wind. As part of his negotiating strategy, Trump believes he must abandon past promises, or at least put them up for bid. The establishment hates Trump for reasons that go beyond his geopolitical vision, but that vision wounds their *amour-propre* and is seen as profoundly threatening to world order. Will not a state that is bereft of a reputation for keeping agreements, they wonder, find suitors for future agreements scarce? Will not enemies take advantage? At certain moments, at least, Trump has cast asunder the structure of promises and understandings that undergirds the establishment worldview. If his gut tells him to ignore it, it means nothing. That makes a hash of the U.S. government's self-proclaimed principles, turns upside down the normative order which officialdom had previously inhabited.

While alienating to the establishment, Trump's way of talking about the allies does not really respond to popular disaffection either. Public opinion of a populist or nationalist tenor, though upset by disparate burdens, wants to withdraw from certain controversies and commitments, not dominate the scene and put America in charge of fully-paid-up sycophants. The old Jacksonian faith was that you fought for honor or safety, but never for cash; out of patriotic devotion, not mercenary gain. Weirdly, Trump's view of alliances seems contrary to both 'the court and the country'—offensive to the establishment vision of America's world role, but alien to the inward-looking (and honor-seeking) ethos of the people. His view of alliances is also utterly different from the 'isolationists' and 'America Firsters' of the 1930s, none of whom wanted an empire of tribute.

Despite radical discontinuities of style and outlook in the president, the Trump administration also represents tremendous continuity, offering not a replacement of U.S. grand strategy but a more belligerent version of it. The effective decision-rule of the pre-Trump 'liberal world order' was always to support friends and thwart enemies. While Trump has made support for allies conditional, thwarting enemies definitely remains on the policy agenda. Trump has little problem with the establishment's belief that it is impossible to have a liberal world order without having hostile relations with Iran, Russia, China, and North Korea; the Trump administration has seen that bid, and raised it. The administration's strategic doctrine—we can do what we want, we intend to establish without question our military superiority, we emphatically have a right to preventive war—are from the pages of the Bush II administration, though the official strategy goes beyond Bush in seeing Russia and China as determined revisionist powers who only understand the logic of force.⁹ Almost certainly Trump will seek to exploit the military buildup he has embraced, though how he will do so is something of a mystery.

Trump's attitude toward alliances is profoundly objectionable to the foreign policy establishment, who want to justify the alliance structure as a union America must lead, not an empire it must dominate. At the same time, Trump's version of the empire of tribute is not too different in spirit from the widespread view that the United States can legislate for the world, because the world has a dollar-based financial system. Defenders of the liberal world order, like John Ikenberry, Stephen Brooks, and William Wohlforth, maintained in 2013

⁹ The two big statements on national strategy are The President of the United States, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, December 2017), and Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, D.C., 2018).

that “the United States does not provide its leadership for free: it extracts disproportionate gains.”¹⁰ Trump proposes a different method for extracting these gains, but it seems that he is not introducing a new principle. In this light, Trump’s version of the empire of tribute is just a more uncouth version of the common tendency, more a throwing off the mask than a radical departure from past practice.¹¹

Trump’s new nationalism showed itself most completely in his proposal to build a wall on the Mexican border, a project that at this writing has yielded a government shutdown and plainly unconstitutional threats by Trump to invoke emergency powers. His racially-insensitive remarks in opposition to immigration seem calculated to foster domestic division. He has thus far shunned anything like a responsible compromise. A reflexive opposition to international cooperation was on display in his withdrawal from the Paris Accord on climate change and his general hostility toward the European Union and the United Nations. He maintained, to no apparent purpose, a better demeanor with authoritarian strongmen than democratic leaders. Enemies to all, friends to none (save Bibi, MbS, and Bolsonaro¹²) appeared often as the manifest tendency and desired result of his policies. He collapsed, in short, the extant moral order of the U.S. imperium, yet paradoxically still maintained that imperium, focusing especially on the reinvigoration of U.S. efforts against Iran and China.

Russia, Russia, Russia

The account thus far has not credited the theory that Donald Trump is the personal agent of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and that The Donald responds frequently and respectfully to Putin’s beck and call. This theory, propounded daily on MSNBC, CNN, and in leading newspapers, rests upon a chain of inference and unproved accusations from which I respectfully dissent. I say respectfully because a significant number of old friends, whose judgment I have previously trusted implicitly, disagree with me on this point, and on many other related points regarding Trump and Russia. Several arguments have ensued. In my experience, it is difficult to recall any matter on which differences over the basic facts are so pronounced a feature of political argument. We seem to have entered an age of fractured truths, in which one side or the other (hopefully, not my side) is in the grip of a delusion.

As a visceral dislike of all things Putin and Russian seems to be broadly shared across the U.S. political spectrum, one ventures a contrary opinion with hesitation, but I think this ubiquitous Russophobia is a sort of frenzy, with wild accusation taken routinely as fact, and which is leavened with some good old fashioned ethnic prejudice. It is in some ways worse than the Red Scare of old, as that did feature some pretty scary Bolsheviks and assorted revolutionaries. The very thing ‘the Blob’ most complains of as having been loosed upon the world by America’s enemies—poisonous national hatreds—it most exhibits in its attitude toward

¹⁰ Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement,” *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2013).

¹¹ For probing reflections on this point, see Jeanne Morefield, “Trump’s Foreign Policy Isn’t the Problem,” *Boston Review* (Fall 2018). Trump’s foreign policy, writes Morefield, “is disturbing because it is uncanny—both grotesque and deeply familiar. Like a funhouse mirror, Trump’s vision of the world reflects back a twisted image of U.S. global politics that is and is not who we are supposed to be.”

¹² The references are to Benjamin “Bibi” Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel; Mohammed bin Salman, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, and Jair Bolsonaro, President of Brazil.

Russia. The attempt to understand the Russian perspective, or find any legitimacy in it, is taken as a sort of thought-crime, tantamount to treason.¹³

There are so many counts against Russia—old scores to settle, new scores proliferating—that it is impossible to deal satisfactorily with all of them, so allow me to state some propositions:

- That Russia has had legitimate grievances against the eastward expansion of NATO and the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which together overturned the post-Cold War treaties for the pacification of Europe.
- That Putin was prescient in his opposition to the U.S. interventions in Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011), correctly foreseeing the mayhem that would ensue.
- That Russia had a decent case in doing what it did in Ukraine in 2014, responding to what was a revolutionary seizure of power by Ukrainian nationalists outside the constitution. The street *putsch* conducted by the mobocracy on the Maidan, strongly encouraged and even facilitated by the United States, violated the first principle of constitutional democracy, yet was universally hailed in the U.S. press as a stunning demonstration of democracy in action. To the contrary, it was a seizure of power in a divided polity that practically guaranteed civil war and foreign intervention. The Russian annexation of Crimea in response was a violation of international law, but on a par with what the United States did in going to war for Kosovo in 1999 and recognizing its independence in 2008.
- That Russia has put forward constructive proposals for an Afghan settlement, which the United States should explore rather than repel. These proposals rightly emphasize the vital importance of achieving a consensus among outside powers as a means of pressuring the Afghans to accept a peace.
- That Russia actually performed a service to the world in coming to the aid of the Syrian government in 2015, fending off U.S.-supported attacks that, if successful, would have produced the sack of Damascus by the Nusra Front, the Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda.¹⁴ U.S. complicity in this illegal and imprudent enterprise of overthrowing President Bashar al-Assad, and with such company, is an unrecognized scandal.
- That allegations that Putin was personally involved in the assassination of Russian journalists or the death of Russian ambassadors, or that he orchestrated terrorist bombings in Moscow to consolidate his power at home, or attempted the murder of Sergei Skripal, are implausible accusations bereft of convincing evidence, though often treated in the Western media as indisputable fact.
- That the closure of Western NGOs in Russia, lessening the space for civil society, has almost uniformly been a response to prior U.S. sanctions, with the ill-conceived 2012 Magnitsky Act getting the ball rolling. Those who urged the course of relentless sanctions against Russia have no one to blame but themselves for this ill outcome.
- That recent Russian opposition to the EU is a function of the sanctions the EU has placed on it, at U.S. prodding. Restore a more normal economic relationship, and Russia would have a more

¹³ See, e.g., Daniel McCarthy, “Why Is John McCain Accusing Rand Paul of Working for Russia?” *The National Interest*, 17 March 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-john-mccain-accusing-rand-paul-working-russia-19808>.

¹⁴ William Van Wagenen, “The Myth of US ‘Inaction’ in Syria,” *The Libertarian Institute*, 8 July 2018, <https://libertarianinstitute.org/articles/the-myth-of-us-inaction-in-syria/>.

constructive attitude. Organizing the EU around anti-Russian sanctions tears at its union; it weakens rather than strengthens it.

Putin, in my view, is best understood as simply looking after Russian national interests, which he has done better than most of the czars in Russian history. He may have pilfered the state's revenues for his own purposes but, as a Russian patriot or nationalist, he sits at the vital center of Russian opinion. Though often described as an autocrat and dictator, he did win several elections, not by fraud, and he has enjoyed over time popular approval ratings that would be the envy of any American politician, and especially so on those questions where he is at odds with the United States. Whatever his other sins, he did carry Russia back from the abyss reached in the late 1990s, and for that he is respected among Russians, who are entitled to love their country. Unfortunately, American opinion is in the grip of the assumption that Russian objectives are ipso facto malign, but this cultural proclivity, reinforced by powerful interests, has created a picture of Putin and Russia that is profoundly distorting.¹⁵ It has also made a negotiated settlement of differences with Russia virtually impossible.

What, then, of Putin's assault on the U.S. democratic process, his role in tilting the election to Trump? Russian meddling in U.S. domestic politics is indeed a serious offense, though it also has to be weighed against U.S. meddling in Russian politics. Reviewing that question over the last 25 years would yield counts against both sides. When Russia offered discussions with the United States in 2017 on ways of containing such officious interference, the U.S. State Department refused, indicating that U.S. authorities wished most of all to do unto them more than the Russians ever could think of doing unto us—an approach that hardly renders the United States more secure from such interference in the future.¹⁶

The most serious offense alleged against the Russians is the involvement of GRU (Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation) officials in the theft of emails from the Democratic National Committee and John Podesta, head of Clinton's campaign, though it strains belief to conclude the release of the emails by WikiLeaks had a material effect on the election. The Podesta trove gave the text of speeches that Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton had made to Goldman Sachs and other richly endowed Wall Street firms, showing that she spoke thoughtfully (albeit in a 'globalist' vein) about cooperation within the Western Hemisphere, but the real scandal attending those speeches—that she pocketed \$675,000 for her three performances at Goldman—had already been reported and was often raised in the Democratic primary debates.¹⁷ The emails of the Democratic National Committee also had almost

¹⁵ See further the excellent analysis of James Carden, "The Cold War Culture War," *American Affairs*, 19 May 2018, <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2018/05/the-cold-war-culture-war/>; Jackson Lears, "What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Russian Hacking," *London Review of Books*, 4 January 2018, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n01/jackson-lears/what-we-dont-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-russian-hacking>; Patrick Lawrence, "Discerning Vladimir Putin," *Raritan* 38 (Summer 2018): 1-15; and Stephen F. Cohen, *War with Russia? From Putin & Ukraine to Trump & Russiagate* (New York: Hot Books, 2019).

¹⁶ John Hudson, "NO DEAL: How Secret Talks with Russia to Prevent Election Meddling Collapsed," *BuzzFeed News*, 8 December 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/johnhudson/no-deal-how-secret-talks-with-russia-to-prevent-election>.

¹⁷ Alan Rappoport, "Questions on Speeches to Goldman Sachs Vex Hillary Clinton," *New York Times*, 4 February 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/05/us/politics/goldman-sachs-hillary-clinton.html>.

nothing in the way of embarrassing material, the major disclosure being that the DNC favored a thirty year veteran who was the unanimous choice of the party establishment over an insurgent challenger who wasn't even a Democrat. I mean, what a shocker.

The precise role of Russia in this unveiling remains obscure, as evidence that might be decisive confronts the brick wall of 'sources and methods' which cannot be disclosed. The fact that the government's case rests in part on evidence supplied by CrowdStrike, an outfit with close ties to the Clintons, raises obvious suspicions, as does the fact that the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) have also cast strong doubt on the government's central claims.¹⁸ The cumulative 15 year record of VIPS is actually a lot better than the intelligence agencies, which are known to lie brazenly, even to Congress, as part of their 'tradecraft.' Julian Assange's heated denials that the Russians were the source are also meaningful. Assange, the editor of WikiLeaks, might be indicted for gross carelessness in the release of information sensitive to individuals, but the establishment hates him for the truths he has revealed. He is not bereft of credibility.

The main case for Russian interference rests on the role played by the Internet Research Agency (IRA) of St. Petersburg. This outfit is alleged to have had a tremendous effect in shaping American opinion, enough to swing the 2016 election, though what it mostly consisted of was 90 Russian twenty-somethings "shitposting" on Facebook, to no greater purpose in most cases than to get more "likes."¹⁹ Breathless reports of the number of impressions from the IRA received on Facebook's News Feed—126 million!—do not mention the minor detail that this amounted to "approximately 1 out of 23,000 pieces of content."²⁰ 80,000 Facebook posts sound like a lot, until one appreciates the fact that Facebook account holders were served 33 trillion posts during the same period, or 413 million times more than what the Russians offered.²¹

For every hundred stories on those wily Russians at the IRA, there is one on the tremendous resources the Trump campaign devoted to a social media blitz that was far more significant in moving voters in the crucial

¹⁸ A good introduction to VIPS, founded in 2003, may be found in the archive of Ray McGovern's work at <http://original.antiwar.com/author/mcgovern/>.

¹⁹ Tyler Durden, "Russian 'Troll Farm' Indictment Shredded by Journalist Who First Profiled It in 2018," *ZeroHedge*, 20 February 2018, <https://www.zerohedge.com/news/2018-02-20/russian-troll-farm-indictment-shredded-journalist-who-first-profiled-it-2015>; Adam Taylor, "The Russian journalist who helped uncover election interference is confounded by the Mueller indictments," *Washington Post*, 18 February 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/18/the-russian-journalist-who-helped-uncover-election-meddling-is-confounded-by-the-mueller-indictments/>.

²⁰ For review, see Aaron Maté, "New Studies Show Pundits Are Wrong about Russian Social-Media Involvement in US Politics," *The Nation*, 20 December 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/russiagate-elections-interference/>.

²¹ Gareth Porter, "Facebook Said 80,000 Russian Posts Were Buried in 33 Trillion Facebook Offerings over Two-Year Period Further Undermining NYT's Case," *Consortium News*, 2 November 2018, <https://consortiumnews.com/2018/11/02/33-trillion-more-reasons-why-the-new-york-times-gets-it-wrong-on-russia-gate/>.

swing states, which the Clinton campaign unaccountably ignored.²² Brad Parscale, Trump’s internet whiz in 2016 and his campaign manager for 2020, compared the Russian role to three pieces of salt in a salad bowl the size of Madison Square Garden, with the Russians spending less than \$10,000 in the same period that the Trump campaign spent \$100 million²³ (and with much of the Russian material having nothing to do with the election). The Democrats have needed and still need to conduct an earnest soul-searching over why they lost to such a man as Trump; instead, they have vigorously, and quite absurdly, externalized the blame.

Then there is RT, the government-funded Russian international media group, which is often brought into the indictment to show malign Russian influence. Our establishment media talks about RT the same way that Trump talks about them, with lots of accusations of fake news and biased reporting, but with very little to nothing in the way of evidence. Considered dispassionately, however, the denunciations of RT by U.S. journalists are just as bad as Trump’s demagogic attacks on the U.S. press—or worse, because they should know better. A sometime reader and viewer over many years, I think RT’s journalistic output is on the whole quite good, usually on a par with prestigious western organizations. Undoubtedly, it could step up its game, but its reporting on various hotspots in the world generally gives a good summation, quoting all the relevant parties. It is often better on this score than, say, the *New York Times*, whose coverage of foreign leaders, if adversarial, seldom gives one the benefit of learning what they actually said. Instead, the reader receives an ideologically slanted account of how bad their motives are, or how once again they are shown to be liars, a proclivity especially on display in the *Times*’s Russia coverage. When the Director of National Intelligence made allegations in January 2017 of Russian involvement in the 2016 election, half of the report consisted of a years-old study of how terrible it was that RT covered the “Occupy Wall Street” demonstrators in New York’s Zucotti Park, or took notice of police repression in the heartland, as if inconvenient truths were just a form of disinformation.²⁴ Given the ideological uniformity across broad swathes of the West’s corporate media landscape, the presence of a competing news organization is good for the world and has allowed for dissident voices in America and elsewhere that are shunned by the major U.S. and Western media. That is a benefit, not a cost. The widespread smearing—intended to provoke the thought that any news or opinion offered by RT is disinformation or propaganda—is just not true, and not right. *RT America* has some fine journalists; shame on the establishment for soiling their reputation.²⁵

²² Connie Loizos, “When you spend \$100 Million on social media, it comes with help, says Trump strategist,” *TechCrunch*, 8 November 2017, <https://techcrunch.com/2017/11/08/when-you-spend-100-million-on-social-media-it-comes-with-help-says-trump-strategist/>; Lois Beckett, “Trump digital director says Facebook helped win the White House,” *The Guardian*, 8 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/08/trump-digital-director-brad-parscale-facebook-advertising>; Dana Bash, “Trump taps Brad Parscale to run his 2020 re-election Campaign,” *CNN Politics*, 1 March 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/27/politics/brad-parscale-donald-trump-2020/>.

²³ Ian Schwartz, “Trump Strategist Brad Parscale vs. PBS ‘Frontline’ on Campaign’s Use of Facebook: ‘A Gift,’” *RealClearPolitics*, 3 December 2018, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2018/12/03/trump_strategist_brad_parscale_vs_pbs_frontline_on_campaigns_use_of_facebook.html.

²⁴ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Background to “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections”: The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution* (Washington, D.C., 6 January 2017).

²⁵ Among such journalists, see for example Anya Parampil and her news program, “In Question.”

At this point, my erstwhile friends will laugh and say, you've dug a big hole for yourself. What do you intend to do? Keep digging, say I, as I also take the view that Trump, though a liar in many things, is not yet a liar when it comes to Russiagate; in other words, that he is sincere in claiming that collusion is a hoax. In his own mind, he did not collude with Russia. Data points purportedly showing the contrary do not in my opinion do so. Trump campaign officials, including Donald Trump, Jr., 'took a meeting' with Russians at Trump Tower, on the lure that material damaging to Clinton might be provided, but there is no evidence that anything came of it. It was over after twenty minutes. Michael Cohen, Trump's personal attorney, continued discussions (off and on over many years) on building a Trump-branded hotel in Moscow—improper after Trump announced his candidacy, surely, but also surely done on the assumption that Trump would lose the election and would be without official influence. Cohen's congressional testimony (recently suspended) may yield further damning details but is likely to allege obstruction of justice (Trump instructing Cohen to lie to Congress about the timing of contacts with Russians), not collusion.²⁶ Two of Trump's subordinates, Paul Manafort and Michael Flynn, sold themselves for cash, but their acts do not demonstrate collusion; Flynn took \$500K from the Turks for himself, not for Trump; Manafort provided polling data to Ukrainian oligarchs for himself, not for Trump (consisting of information in the spring, most of it from public sources, of no possible consequence in the fall).²⁷ Flynn's lies to FBI investigators, querying his conversations with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak in December 2016, are admittedly inexplicable, but Flynn was the incoming National Security Advisor and was entitled to establish contact with the Russian ambassador and to declare the attitude of the incoming administration on foreign policy. It was decidedly improper to intervene on an existing UN resolution during the interregnum, but that intervention was made was to Russia on behalf of Israel, showing collusion with the latter, not the former.²⁸ In placing confidence in Manafort and Flynn, Trump demonstrated an altogether characteristic lack of judgment, but such is not the proof of the indictment.²⁹

²⁶ Jason Leopold and Anthony Cormier, "President Trump Directed His Attorney Michael Cohen to Lie to Congress about the Moscow Tower Project," *buzzfeednews.com*, 17 January 2019, an article deemed "not accurate" by Mueller's office a day later. Trump explains his interest in the Moscow Trump Tower by observing "There was a good chance that I wouldn't have won, in which case I would have gotten back into the business, and why should I lose lots of opportunities?" It does seem that Trump devoted more thought in 2016 to what he was going to do if he lost (TV network? More hotels on the basis of his strengthened brand?) than to how he would run the country if he won. But if one explains Trump's intimations during the election of a coming detente with Russia as intended to get his name above the Moscow skyline, it is evident that the anticipated benefit was not received. Under that explanation, Trump would owe Russia nothing.

²⁷ Samuel Chamberlain, "New York Times Issues Correction to Bombshell Report on Manafort, Oleg Deripaska," *Fox News*, 9 January 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/new-york-times-issues-correction-to-bombshell-report-on-manafort-oleg-deripaska>; Sharon LaFraniere, Kenneth P. Vogel, and Maggie Haberman, "Manafort Accused of Sharing Trump Polling Data with Russian Associate," *New York Times*, 8 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/08/us/politics/manafort-trump-campaign-data-kilimnik.html>.

²⁸ Max Blumenthal, "Michael Flynn's Indictment Exposes Trump Team's Collusion with Israel, Not Russia," *Alternet.org*, 5 December 2017, <https://www.alternet.org/grayzone-project/flynn-indictment-exposes-collusion-israel>.

²⁹ Probably the most bizarre thing Trump did was escorting Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, together with Ambassador Kislyak, into the Oval Office on 10 May 2017, the day after he had fired Comey, at which rendezvous the president informed them that Comey was a 'nut job,' and that firing the FBI Director would put Trump in the clear, as recounted in Matt Apuzzo et al., "Trump Told Russians That Firing 'Nut Job' Comey Eased Pressure From

The latest scandal in two years of incessantly breaking scandals (always on inspection falling short of a “smoking gun”) is that Trump, as president, wanted to keep his conversations with Vladimir Putin private, even to his own government. Trump did so, however, at a time when his administration was leaking like a sieve, with every expectation that a read-out would in short order be blazoned in the headlines. Unless the right of presidential negotiation and private consultation with foreign leaders is given up, save with the oversight and permission of the Deep State, Trump was within his rights in doing that. Trump ran in part on the idea of ‘getting along with Russia.’ ‘What’s so bad about that?’ he asked. Trump’s comments about Russia were among many election promises—some utterly delusional, like paying off the national debt in eight years after a big tax cut, or seizing the Iraqi oil fields to make all that hard work and sacrifice worth it—so it was not clear how seriously he took this. But he did run on it. And Clinton made it the outstanding element in her campaign against him, the highlight of their third debate, when she called him Putin’s puppet. Trump having *won the election*, any tentative move in the direction of ‘getting along’ was nevertheless seen by official Washington as an unpardonable sin. Emphasizing the nonpartisan nature of his commitment, former FBI Director James Comey argued: “It’s not about Republicans or Democrats. [The Russians] are coming after America, which I hope we all love equally. They want to undermine our credibility in the face of the world. They think that this great experiment of ours is a threat to them. So they’re going to try to run it down and dirty it up as much as possible. That’s what this is about and they will be back. Because we remain — as difficult as we can be with each other, we remain that shining city on the hill. And they don’t like it.”³⁰ The language that the security state (represented by the FBI, CIA, NSA, DOD, DOJ, and NSC) uses to describe Russia is revealing of the deepest enmity. The Russians, said former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, “are almost genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favor, whatever.”³¹ FBI lawyer Lisa Page put the general ethos succinctly: “I do always hate the Russians.”³² The Deep State believes that the all-consuming question of the primacy of domestic versus foreign policy has been decided forever and on, and that it is just useful idiocy to pretend otherwise. The people (and their elected representatives) must be saved from their folly. One wonders if any other FBI directors have felt that way.

The overall record thus reflects more the morbid establishment fear of any reconciliation with Russia than any quid pro quo or collusion on the part of Trump. Still less does the record bear out the claim that Trump is a Russian agent or takes orders from the Kremlin. Trump’s entire *modus operandi*, his whole way of being in

Investigation,” *New York Times*, 19 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/19/us/politics/trump-russia-comey.html>. Objectively considered, this was just crazy, as only an idiot could fail to foresee the overwhelming demand to follow that a Special Counsel should be immediately appointed. As Trump is not an idiot, not really, the puzzle is best solved by the supposition that Trump believed that the Russia stuff was all made up by the Democrats, so was totally surprised by the political reaction to his misstep.

³⁰ “Full Text: James Comey Testimony Transcript on Trump and Russia,” *Politico*, 8 June 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/06/08/full-text-james-comey-trump-russia-testimony-239295>.

³¹ Kailani Koenig, “James Clapper on Trump-Russia Ties: ‘My Dashboard Warning Light Was Clearly On,’” *NBC News*, 28 May 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/james-clapper-trump-russia-ties-my-dashboard-warning-light-was-n765601>.

³² Jeff Carlson, “Transcripts of Lisa Page’s Closed-Door Testimonies Provide New Revelations in Spygate Scandal,” *Epoch Times*, 11 January 2019, https://www.theepochtimes.com/transcripts-of-lisa-pages-closed-door-testimonies-provide-new-revelations_2763452.html.

the world, shows him to be nobody's puppet; he is not beholden to anybody but himself. Trump, who is guilty of so many things, has yet been endlessly harassed on the one charge of which he is innocent.³³

In tallying up the misdeeds of the 2016 election, which the media seems determined to replay in an endless loop, hoping for a better outcome, one should also not neglect the shenanigans on the other side—the use of agents provocateur to entrap George Papadopoulos and Carter Page, erstwhile Trump ‘advisors’³⁴; the employment by the Clinton campaign of Christopher Steele and a network of British intelligence agents to dig the dirt on Trump; the probable involvement of other foreign intelligence services in an anti-Trump campaign before the election³⁵; the manifest belief of then-CIA Director John Brennan that any contact with a Russian was sufficient cause to suspect treason and to justify surveillance; the dubious use of perjury traps by Special Counsel Robert Mueller and his unconscionable prosecution of Russian national Maria Butina, who had the misfortune to believe that she was living in a free country.³⁶

Instead of an administration soft on Russia, the plain fact is that Trump's team, in its personnel and policies, has been deeply hostile to Russia and has opposed it across the board. The administration announced its intention to withdraw from the intermediate range missile nuclear pact. It has closed down Russian consulates and expelled diplomats. It has named Russia a malign and revisionist power in its formal national security strategies. It has stepped up its supply of arms to Ukrainian nationalists and gone ahead with Barack Obama's expansion of NATO military installations in Poland and the Baltics, revoking a previous promise of the U.S. government. It has sought vigorously, through threat of draconian sanctions, to stop the Nord Stream 2 pipeline from Russia to Germany. Though Trump has not gone as far in his anti-Russian sanctions as desired

³³ If Robert Mueller shows the contrary, I will host a party for my friends at which they may denounce me as a useful idiot. But I expect reciprocity.

³⁴ Daniel Lazare, “The Spooks Spooking Themselves,” Mint Press News, 31 May 2018, <https://www.mintpressnews.com/russiagate-the-spooks-spooking-themselves/243117/>; Lee Smith, “The Maltese Phantom of Russiagate,” *RealClearInvestigations*, 30 May 2018, https://www.realeclearinvestigations.com/articles/2018/05/26/the_maltese_phantom_of_russiagate_.html.

³⁵ Kenneth P. Vogel and David Stern, “Ukrainian Efforts to Sabotage Trump Backfire,” *Politico*, 11 January 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/ukraine-sabotage-trump-backfire-233446>; Justin Raimondo, “The Final Truth of Russia-gate,” *antiwar.com*, 8 October 2018, <https://original.antiwar.com/justin/2018/10/07/the-final-truth-of-russia-gate/>.

³⁶ On the Butina case, see especially Sarah Lindemann-Komarova, “Maria Butina and the Criminalization of Citizen Diplomacy,” *The Nation*, 26 December 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/ maria-butina-russia-nonprofits/>. The charge brought against Butina—failing to register as a foreign agent—cannot be seen as an exemplification of the rule of law, unless followed by a thousand other such prosecutions, strictly adhering to the operative rule of the Butina case, as the Justice Department miraculously awakens to the Washington influence game. These charges also invite other foreign states to do the same—that is, charge American citizens who may have had contact with official U.S. representatives with being unregistered foreign agents, making this U.S. decree inimical to the protection of its own citizens. Butina, as Lindemann-Komarova observes, “was only doing what the US government and numerous Western private foundations have spent millions of dollars promoting Russians to do: become active, create an NGO, and generate increased understanding between the two countries.”

by his Democratic adversaries, who seem to seek a total embargo on U.S.-Russian relations, those sanctions are much more severe than when Trump began his term.

What is in fact an across-the-board-increase in the hostility of the U.S. state toward Russia, alongside the virtual elimination of diplomatic contact, is somehow construed as a record of rank appeasement by Trump toward Russia, about which the New Cold Warriors on right and left incessantly complain. Of all the dangerous features of the contemporary world conjuncture, this is just about the worst, as it has effectively neutralized the domestic constituency most likely to oppose militarism. Where once that opposition resided, if feebly, in the Democratic Party, it has absconded from those premises, as the Democrats and their media allies have embraced the intelligence agencies and the neoconservatives as oracles of truth.³⁷ Hillary Clinton has called Putin “the leader of an authoritarian, white-supremacist and xenophobic movement that wants to break up the EU, weaken America’s traditional alliances and undermine democracy. We can see this authoritarian movement rippling out from the Kremlin, reaching across Europe and beyond. It’s emboldening right-wing nationalists, separatists, racists, and even neo-nazis.”³⁸ Such has the culture war, on steroids, been strangely adapted to the exigencies of foreign policy, marrying it in the process to militarism. Clinton’s outlook is supposed to be ‘woke,’ but in fact it is extremely regressive. Even the progressive voices in the Democratic Party, like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, hinge their foreign policy vision on a worldwide struggle between ‘democrats’ and ‘authoritarians.’ They fall in with the common tendency, and accept the Warfare State’s major postulate, which is the demonization of enemies, who are set in opposition to an idealized self.

People should relax about Trump’s supposed affinities for Putin. It was pretty obvious from the outset that Trump would be forced to toe the establishment line on Russia, and that his only real room for maneuver was becoming more hawkish and forcing his Democratic adversaries to applaud him. That, in signal measure, he has done, absent the attending applause. Uniformly, the national security staff he has appointed was belligerent toward Russia. They all spit vitriol at Russia throughout their tenures, of whom the most advanced in this technique was UN Ambassador Nikki Haley. A lot of them, of course, have gone through the door, but there was not a dove toward Russia among the first team or their replacements. Did Trump not know that when he appointed them?

Greater Middle East

Trump’s conduct in the Middle East also shows a lot of continuity with the past. Obama, as it were, moved away (if cautiously) from what had previously been the categorical imperative of U.S. policy in the Middle East: oppose Iran at every turn. Trump has resumed that march. During the campaign Trump had promised to move the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, as other presidential candidates had done

³⁷ Glenn Greenwald, “Full Email from William Arkin, Leaving NBC and MSNBC,” *Medium*, 3 January 2019, <https://medium.com/@ggreenwald/full-email-from-william-arkin-leaving-nbc-and-msnbc-1fb0d1dc692b>; Stephen Wertheim, “Return of the Neocons,” *The New York Review of Books*, 2 January 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/01/02/return-of-the-neocons/>.

³⁸ Padraic Halpin, “Putin Leading Xenophobic Movement out to Damage U.S., Hillary Clinton Says,” *Reuters*, 22 June 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ireland-clinton/putin-leading-xenophobic-movement-out-to-damage-u-s-hillary-clinton-says-idUSKBN1JI21R>.

before him. Unlike them, he followed through. His settler-supporting ambassador, David Friedman, was everything a Netanyahu government could ask for, supportive of Israel across the board. Any pretense of evenhandedness toward the Israelis and the Palestinians was dropped, and U.S. contributions to Palestinian relief were sharply reduced.³⁹ As Trump had advertised most of this during his campaign, these steps were not really a surprise. More surprising, given Trump's habit of denouncing Saudi Arabia in 2016, was the close relationship he wanted to establish with the House of Saud. He lifted the limited restraints that Obama, at the end of his administration, had imposed on the Saudi war in Yemen. Despite the recent protestations of Obama officials against Trump's Yemen policy, the Obama administration was deeply complicit in supporting the Saudi effort from the beginning. Trump, we may be sure, is not haunted by that complicity, as doubtless are Ben Rhodes and former UN Ambassador Samantha Power, and he seems, as noted previously, to approach the Saudi relationship as a purely business proposition. We protect you; you keep the price of oil low and buy our arms. Even with his friends, Trump manages to violate the proprieties, as in his declaration that the Saudis would not last two weeks without U.S. protection. That is actually untrue, as money buys a lot of protection, and the Iranians are not going to invade Saudi Arabia. The real threats to Saudi stability are internal to the regime, for which U.S. support could hardly be decisive. In the (unlikely) event that the Saudis were to face a crisis of legitimacy, producing a revolutionary situation in the country, it is very doubtful if the U.S. military could save them.

The U.S.-Saudi war in Yemen was placed under tremendous strain by the revelation that *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi was killed in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul (2 October 2018). Suddenly, the things the Saudis were doing in Yemen, which they had been doing for three years with full U.S. support, aroused attention and opposition in the media and Congress. The ability of a singular event to so move domestic opinion is striking, comparable with what occurred when fighters for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) beheaded two U.S. journalists in the late summer of 2014. These horrific acts, which were accessible on the Internet, produced a huge shift in U.S. public opinion in support of a war against ISIS, toward which the public had previously been cool. Something visceral, even if confined to a single individual, counts a thousand times more than anonymous body counts, the daily, repetitious stories about 50 children burned up here in a bus, 40 blown up there in a market, hundreds of thousands (or is it millions?) on the cusp of starvation. This parade of horrors, in the political imagination, is not as real as two beheadings, not as real as killing a journalist and tidying up the remains with a bone saw. How much this overall phenomenon shows the fickleness of public opinion, as opposed to the machinations of the corporate media, is a question. One journalist discovered that MSNBC, the so-called liberal network, did not run a single segment devoted to Yemen in the second half of 2017, with Russia earning 5000 percent more attention than that war-and-famine-wracked land.⁴⁰ When it wasn't Putin, it was Stormy Daniels. Yemen was off the radar.

In late 2018, Trump and the Republicans beat back the effort to shut down the sale of U.S. arms to the Saudis. That they will be embarrassed into putting serious pressure on the Saudis to relent in the war, though a much greater possibility than previously thought, still remains doubtful. Powerful interests are engaged in

³⁹ "Palestinians Brand US Aid Cut to UN Group 'A Flagrant Assault,'" *BBC News*, 1 September 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45381173>.

⁴⁰ Ben Norton, "MSNBC Ignores Catastrophic US-Backed War in Yemen," *FAIR*, 8 January 2018, <https://fair.org/home/msnbc-yemen-russia-coverage-2017/>.

that struggle on the side of the administration; the critics have only moral indignation on which to rely.⁴¹ (That is enough for me; Lockheed, Boeing, and Raytheon, along with those favoring a U.S.-Israel-Saudi axis, will take a different view.)

Trump's biggest step in the Middle East was to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear agreement with Iran. This entailed defying a United Nations Security Council resolution previously endorsed by the United States, and committed the United States to economic war against Iran. In this enterprise the Trump administration has also enlisted the unwilling participation of U.S. allies in Europe and Asia, as the United States made access to the U.S. financial system contingent on the observance of an embargo against Iran. By traditional international law, it is pertinent to note, the U.S.-enforced embargo would be considered an act of war. The administration's twelve demands also entail Iranian capitulation across the board, with failure to comply leading to "the strongest sanctions in history."⁴² The High Church does offer some indulgences for the mortal sin of trading with Iran, dispensations for which will be conditioned by the state of the oil market.⁴³

A striking feature of this policy is how inconsistent it is with the normal portrayal of the U.S. alliance system as a community of democracies, a concert of free states enjoying withal the right of an independent foreign policy. No more, it would seem. The Iran sanctions are the clearest instance yet of the imperial process wherein the associates of empire are reduced to the condition of subjects, a road once followed by ancient Athens and ancient Rome, and beckoning to an America that feels it has discovered a tremendous source of power. If the U.S. can put in jail or fine anyone who defies it on this score, it has a lot of whack to coerce both allies and enemies. Government officials should also be able to see (but apparently do not) that this use of the financial system for "strategic" ends can be only a wasting asset—that is, one that is diminished by its use.⁴⁴ Sustaining the anti-Iran policy in Washington is an alliance of the Israel Lobby and the Military Industrial Complex, but it is supported in the heartland by evangelical fervor for Israel and by generic U.S. public opposition to 'terrorism,' in which guise the Iranians are invariably made to appear in the media. The public, asked in the summer of 2018 whether the United States should declare war on Iran, objected strongly to the idea, with 53 percent opposed and just 23 percent in favor. But stranger things have happened. Trump

⁴¹ Daniel Larison of *The American Conservative*, practically alone among pundits, has been on the case of the Yemen War from the beginning. See his archive at theamericanconservative.com/larison-tags/yemen/.

⁴² "Mike Pompeo Speech: What Are the 12 Demands Given to Iran?," *Al Jazeera News*, 21 May 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/mike-pompeo-speech-12-demands-iran-180521151737787.html>.

⁴³ Colin Dwyer, "U.S. Is About To Reinstat Iran Sanctions. Here's What That Means," *NPR*, November 2, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/02/663377999/u-s-is-days-away-from-reinstating-iran-sanctions-heres-what-that-means>.

⁴⁴ Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, "The Transatlantic Data War: Europe Fights Back Against the NSA," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2016).

did appoint John Bolton, a longstanding advocate of preventive war against Iran, as his National Security Advisor, and the president has tweeted out some blistering threats.⁴⁵

Trump's surprise decision in December 2018 to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria on a one-month timetable, which was subsequently extended to four months with uncertain conditions, was widely greeted as a revolution in U.S. policy, and it is certainly true that the sequence that occurred—Trump deciding to defy his generals and policymakers—is something that could not have occurred *like that* in a previous administration. It was more suggestive of the impulsive action of a teenager, revolting against some outrageous parental restriction, than the act of a seasoned captain in control of his team. Though the way Trump did it was widely reprobated, bespeaking fecklessness and uncertain purpose, the policy it displaced—an illegal U.S. armed presence on Syrian territory, whose chief purpose had apparently become a forced withdrawal from Syria of all Iranian militia—was equally bad. An alternative policy, such as I have advocated elsewhere, would pursue a U.S. troop withdrawal with a diplomacy seeking a peaceful settlement of the Syrian war.⁴⁶ The U.S. would join the Astana peace process with Russia, Turkey, and Iran, recognize the Syrian government, and work conscientiously for the return of refugees and for economic reconstruction. The joint objective of Russia and America would be autonomy for the Kurds within Syria and withdrawal of Kurdish support for compatriots in Turkey. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would be accepted as the war's victor, with Russia supervising de-confliction and the protection of estranged populations. Obstacles to Syria's economic reconstruction would be lifted, in return for which Hezbollah and Iran would reduce their presence, the war that justified the presence in the first place having been won.

However desirable in theory, if peace is the American purpose, such an alternative policy seems impossible to imagine from any U.S. government, much less one headed by Trump. Two weeks previous to Trump's announcement, the administration's point man on Syria, James Jeffrey, endorsed a policy of three no's in regard to Syria: no action on refugees, no recognition of Assad, and no reconstruction for Syria, by the United States or anybody else, all to be enforced by that previously noticed sanctions hammer.⁴⁷ However Trump's withdrawal plays out, his administration will likely remain wedded to the suffocation of the regime. This is a cruel policy of collective punishment, one that is actually counterproductive in furthering U.S. interests, but held to obsessively and cynically by the establishment. Syria apart, Trump is still actively engaged on the other anti-Iranian fronts. Grand pronouncements that Trump's Syria decision signals a departure from the Middle East are to be viewed with the greatest suspicion. Not beyond the realm of possibility is that retreat by Trump on one anti-Iranian front might be attended, in the future, with advance on another. It is a given that he will face intense pressure to show his mettle on that question.

⁴⁵ Carol Morello, "NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN,' Trump Tweets in Warning to Iran's Rouhani," *Washington Post*, 23 July 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pompeo-likens-irans-leaders-to-the-mafia/2018/07/22/e4f559a8-3f06-439c-8b83-a23278956ebe_story.html.

⁴⁶ David C. Hendrickson, "Why The United States Won't Be Able to Quit Syria," *The American Conservative*, 4 January 2019, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/why-the-united-states-wont-be-able-to-quit-syria/>.

⁴⁷ Briefing with Special Representative for Syria Engagement Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, U.S. Department of State, 3 December 2018.

East Asia

The biggest surprise of Trump's East Asian diplomacy is the relationship that Trump developed with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The ride was plenty wild. Trump's first year in office witnessed a full court press on North Korea, with threats of preventive war thrown about with some regularity by administration spokesmen and their allies in Congress.⁴⁸ A war there, said Senator Lindsey Graham, was a damn sight better than a war here; completely absent from that calculation was the consideration of what would happen to the millions of Koreans potentially incinerated in such a conflict. How American allies can listen to this sort of thing without bolting the relationship is a question that will be asked, and asked again, in the future. It is a given that it implants in them a desire to bolt, even if they do not bolt, after appraising the risks and benefits of the U.S. connection. The same may be said of Trump's dictatorial comment in the Oval Office, regarding the government of South Korea: "They won't [ease sanctions] without our approval. They do nothing without our approval."⁴⁹

After fiery and furious rhetoric in 2017, the outlook suddenly shifted. Soon after the Seoul Olympics in early 2018, South Korea announced that Trump had accepted an invitation to meet with the North Korean leader in Pyongyang in May. After an abrupt cancellation by Trump in the spring, amid verbal fireworks, the summit was subsequently rescheduled and held in Singapore on 12 June 2018. According to Trump, that just about wrapped things up, but in fact it did not do so at all. In interpreting the Delphic document issued at that meeting, the U.S. government reverted to its traditional stance: you make all the concessions, then we'll think about it. Kim envisions a more reciprocal process, as he made clear in his New Year's address in 2019, in effect taking relations back to square one, though with an inter-Korean peace process underway and an unofficial moratorium on missile tests. Will the North resume those if the U.S. opposes any sanctions relief? Will the U.S. threats that preceded the 'breakthrough' then follow in its aftermath, as the breakthrough breaks down?

That outcome would seem probable if the U.S. maintains its stance, though the announcement on January 20 of negotiations for a new meeting with Trump and Kim (anticipated at this writing to take place in Vietnam in February 2019) may produce a shift in the U.S. position. If the U.S. refuses sanctions relief, a separate peace in opposition to U.S. policy is not out of the question, though it is still unlikely. America is fortunate to have in President Moon Jae-in a South Korean leader who shows great skill in peace-making, but the more he succeeds, the more he will face opposition in Washington. Favored in the U.S. capital are those who view peace-making with Kim as a fool's errand, and who will fight Moon tooth and nail, in the guise of fighting Kim. Though the interest of the American people is undoubtedly best served by helping Moon help the U.S. make peace with Kim, and though Trump just might have an instinct to do that, the national security establishment (the swamp) protests at any such outlandish objective. It wants the status quo, wants the

⁴⁸ For the dangers of accidental war this posed, see Van Jackson, *On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁴⁹ Remarks by President Trump in Briefing..., *The White House*, 10 October 2018.

weapons programs that go along with it, and wants the position in Northeast Asia that a divided Korea gives it.⁵⁰

America's great contest in foreign policy is with China. So, last but not least, we note the dramatic downturn in U.S.-China relations over the last year, now pressed on several fronts. There is much evidence of a deepening spiral of hostility, but not much evidence as to how a limit is to be put to it. American strategic thinkers speak coolly of the likelihood of a U.S.-China military clash; even more alarmingly, they do not consider this to be a basis for rethinking a strategic posture that might produce such a dangerous outcome, with its 1914-like potential.

Trump's relationship with China began on an odd footing. Trump highlighted in his first year his special personal relationship with Chinese leader Xi Jinping, which was forged that enchanted April evening at Mar-a-Lago when Xi was informed, just before dessert, that U.S. air strikes had been ordered in Syria. Given Trump's overall commitments, however, that hyped-up moment of supposed good feeling was guaranteed not to last, and it did not. Trump viewed China in 2017 as potentially useful in solving the North Korean problem, and when it did not perform to specs he resumed the hostile policy he had promised during the campaign. The tariff war is the most dramatic illustration of this changed tack, with 10 percent tariffs imposed on \$250 billion of Chinese imports in 2018, and with Trump threatening to increase tariffs on Chinese imports from 10 to 25 percent unless a deal is cut by 2 March 2019.⁵¹

The United States has serious economic issues with China, chiefly a trade deficit that is too large and should be reduced. But China is only part of that problem, and tariffs directed against China will, all things being equal, simply reorient global supply chains to other countries (like Mexico and Vietnam) rather than address the larger trade imbalance. Trumpian political economy shows a deep incoherence on this very point, with Trump and Republican-inspired gargantuan fiscal deficits working strongly against attempts to mitigate imbalances in trade. That requires a sane fiscal policy, not the trillion dollar budget deficits in prospect. Instead of negotiations with the surplus wielding nations (China, Germany, Japan, etc.) to reduce trade imbalances, Trump offered an escalating tariff war and a savings gap. Notoriously, Trump said that by the time the debt squeeze came to matter, he would be gone, so who cares, but the wolf at the door—a financial

⁵⁰ For an excellent assessment, see Daniel R. DePetris, "Advancing Peace and Security on the Korean Peninsula: The Case for Koreanization," *38 North (The Henry L. Stimson Center)*, 18 January 2019, <https://www.38north.org/2019/01/ddepetris011819/>. For a vivid portrayal of "the swamp," see Kelley Beaucar Vlahos, "Mattis: One More General for the 'Self Licking Ice Cream Cone,'" *The American Conservative*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/mattis-one-more-general-for-the-self-licking-ice-cream-cone/>, and other essays in her archive. The best study is Mike Lofgren, *The Deep State: The Fall of the Constitution and the Rise of Shadow Government* (New York: Penguin, 2016). See further the symposium at <https://nationalinterest.org/tag/deep-state>. The ideological commitments of the Deep State—above all, fierce enmity to perceived enemies—are just as important as the web of interests these commitments cover and protect, superbly depicted in Lofgren. How it works politically is told in exacting detail by Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

⁵¹ Matthew S. Schwartz, "U.S.-China Trade Talks Wrap Up after Extending to 3rd Day," *NPR*, 9 January 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/09/683497610/us-china-trade-talks-wrap-up-after-extending-to-third-day>.

crisis—might come sooner than expected.⁵² American financial bubbles apart, there is a bubble beginning to burst in China, arising from the prodigious mal-investment in steel and concrete during China's building craze. Trump may yet go down as the man who popped it. That outcome, the evidence for which is mounting, would have big consequences for the world economy and for U.S.-China relations.

Conclusion

In Asia, no less than in Europe and the Middle East, the Trump administration has ratcheted up the tension with America's traditional adversaries. The observance of these enmities is the great constant in the U.S. government's conduct of foreign relations. Trump has not seriously departed from this proclivity, but, on the contrary, has mostly enhanced it. Where he has upended things is with America's allies, none of whom, in Europe and Asia at least, looks upon him with anything other than alarm. One wonders if they gather, in safe rooms free from U.S. eavesdropping, to gossip over what a Mad Hatter he is, and what a farce it has now become to deal with the U.S. government. Probably they do. On the other hand, what are they to do but to bear with the uncertain tide, suppressing retaliatory venom, in the hope that something will turn up? Those "traditional allies" are not looking so good themselves. German Chancellor Angela Merkel's dominance, once so sturdy, seems now broken, her era at an end and German politics left without a center. French President Emmanuel Macron faces near revolution; Italy is commanding impossibilities; Britain is falling out of the EU and probably apart at the seams. The Poles and Hungarians nurse their ancient grievances and find solace in authoritarianism, just like in the old days between the wars. Trump is part of the West's crack-up, but by no means the only part.

I earlier characterized Trump as a militarist seeking his opportunity, though I concede that this might prove to be wrong. The man is difficult to figure. On Monday, he wants to be the dictator of the world, and is all fire and brimstone; on Tuesday, he says he wants the troops back home and talks up border and tariff walls. On Wednesday, God knows. Just in the past week, as if to illustrate the contrary tendencies, the U.S. seems closer to peace in Afghanistan and much closer to war in Venezuela. At one level, Trump has shredded U.S. commitments to allies, often talking as if those commitments mean nothing. He has complained bitterly that 'his generals' aren't winning the wars he inherited in Afghanistan and Syria. He wants to get out of those. In private, he denounced George W. Bush as a warmonger. But Trump, in complaining about the wars the U.S. is losing, also asks: "When are we going to start winning some wars?" He also observed, to his generals: "You should be killing guys. You don't need a strategy to kill people."⁵³ He has no compunctions about the Saudi war in Yemen or America's drone war; he is a friend of the carceral state and of the philosophy of force. The national security appointments of his second year (especially John Bolton and Mike Pompeo) were from the most belligerent wing of the most belligerent political party. Perhaps his bellicose talk is mostly just for show, so that in North Korea, for example, he would never follow through, as he would likely be dissuaded by the evident catastrophe a U.S. first strike might create. Perhaps his economic war against Iran will not lead to a shooting war, which is so much desired by America's 'allies' in the region. Perhaps the worsening of relations with China and Russia will not issue in grave consequences. A militarist seeking his opportunity might still lack opportunities. I would like to believe we are out of danger on that score, but do not. Besides, the

⁵² Asawin Suebsaeng and Lachlan Markay, "Trump on Coming Debt Crisis: 'I Won't Be Here'," *Daily Beast*, 5 December 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-on-coming-debt-crisis-i-wont-be-here-when-it-blows-up>.

⁵³ Woodward, *Fear*, 221.

commitment to empire runs much deeper than Trump, and most of his political opposition is no more interested in averting geopolitical conflict than he is. That spells future danger.

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