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## Trump: From Globalism to Isolationism

In August 2020, the administration of Donald Trump has been in power for three-and-a-half years. During this time, the government has steadily withdrawn from the world economy. While de-globalization probably started earlier (the U.S. trade-to-GDP ratio began declining in 2012), President Trump seemingly resented U.S. interdependence on other countries for imports (especially of manufactured goods), for military expenditures that far exceeded those of our allies, for leadership of international institutions and treaties, and for support of other countries' development through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). To mitigate these perceived problems, Trump adopted a strategy called "America First." This strategy of isolationism was first advocated during the interwar period (1918-1939), when depression, fascism and communism set the stage for the Second World War.

These isolationist measures by the Trump administration has reduced American influence and power throughout the world. On January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017, his first day in office, Trump (1) withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Then, on June 1<sup>st</sup>, he (2) announced that the United States would withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement (although the Agreement prevented this process from being formalized until November 2019). For three years, he consistently (3) blocked the appointment of judges to the World Trade Organization, leaving it unable to adjudicate trade disputes. In 2018, after raising tariffs on imported goods from China, Mexico and Canada, Trump (4) commenced a trade war with China, which led to an insubstantial deal in December 2019. In 2020, he (5) withdrew funding from the World Health Organization amid the devastating COVID19 pandemic.

Dangerously in May 2018, Trump (6) announced withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear agreement, painstakingly negotiated by the Obama Administration with five other countries to prevent Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons for at least ten years. Even more seriously, in August 2019, the Trump Administration (7) formally withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987.

Three months later, Trump (8) abandoned the Kurds, our allies in Northern Syria, by withdrawing American troops at the insistence of Turkey's prime minister. In May 2020, Trump (9) pulled the United States out of the Open Skies Agreement, which allowed unarmed surveillance flights over participating countries. Further, in late July of 2020, President Trump (10) announced the withdrawal of 12,000 American troops stationed in Germany, as redress for Angela Merkel spending too little on defense.

Trump's anti-global attitudes seemed to conflict with his personal business successes. His golf courses, casinos, hotels, and Asian sourcing of materials and retail goods depended on globalization. So perhaps his opposition was a political ploy to appeal to a voter base for which globalization was not especially beneficial. Regardless, the attack on globalization was clearly articulated in April 2016, when Trump (then

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a presidential candidate) addressed the Center for the National Interest (a conservative foreign policy think-tank). “America First will be the major and overriding theme of my administration,” he announced. With a trade deficit “approaching \$1 trillion per year... we’re rebuilding other countries, while weakening our own.”<sup>1</sup> In June 2016, speaking at a campaign event in Monessen, Pennsylvania, Trump complained that:

...our politicians have aggressively pursued a policy of globalization - moving our jobs, our wealth and our factories to Mexico and overseas. This wave of globalization has wiped out our middle class... At the center of this catastrophe are two trade deals pushed by Bill and Hillary Clinton. First, the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA. Second, China's entry into the World Trade Organization.<sup>2</sup>

After taking office, Trump continued to attack globalization with the full weight of the executive branch. In a 2019 speech to the United Nations, he asserted “the future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots....It is why we in the United States have embarked on an exciting program of national renewal.”<sup>3</sup> Then in a campaign-style speech at a Whirlpool plant in Ohio, on August 5, 2020, Trump again announced tariffs on Canadian aluminum, breaching the terms of the recently negotiated NAFTA: “Canada was taking advantage of us, as usual....very unfair, said Trump.”<sup>4</sup>

The *Transpacific Partnership (TPP)* was a trade agreement among 12 countries around the Pacific Rim, negotiated by the Obama administration. It was part of Obama’s “Pivot to East Asia.” The TPP would lower tariffs and remove non-tariff barriers to trans-Pacific trade, which accounted for more than 40% of exports by the United States. The TPP, signed into law by Obama in February 2016, excluded China and featured provisions for environmental protection, labor standards, intellectual property, human rights and governance.

After President Trump announced this withdrawal, the remaining 11 countries decided to renegotiate the agreement without the U.S. In March 2018, they signed a revised version, called the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement to Trans-Pacific Partnership. Analysts worried that the U.S. absence from the agreement would give China new impetus to negotiate a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, boosting China’s exports to Southeast Asia and enhancing its geopolitical goals in the region.<sup>5</sup>

Exiting the *Paris Climate Agreement* was next. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is an international treaty adopted in 1992 to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. Parties and observers (U.S.) to the agreement had met annually since 1995 to assess progress in addressing climate change. As emissions grew, the parties developed stricter guidelines for emissions reductions, eventually adopting their own targets for limiting temperature increases to 2 degrees Celsius. Finally, in Paris in May of 2015, virtually all countries agreed to emissions reductions from 2020 forward. Only eight states, including Iran, Angola and Libya, failed to sign.<sup>6</sup>

Even before his campaign, Trump had repeatedly undermined the veracity of climate change. “The concept of global warming,” tweeted Trump in 2012, “was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive.” In 2013, he added, “Global warming is a total, and very expensive hoax.” On Fox News, in 2014, he added that the hoax was perpetrated by “scientists [who] are having a lot of fun.”<sup>7</sup>

On June 1, 2017, Trump spoke from the Rose Garden:

The Paris Climate Accord is simply the latest example of Washington entering into an agreement that disadvantages the United States to the exclusive benefit of other countries, leaving American workers – who I love – and taxpayers to absorb the cost....Compliance with the terms of the Paris Accord and the onerous energy restrictions it has placed on the United States could cost America as much as 2.7 million lost jobs by 2025....<sup>8</sup>

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In 2019, global greenhouse gas emissions reached 36.8 billion tons and temperatures were the second highest on record, almost certain to breach the 2 degree Celsius target.

The *World Trade Organization* replaced the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1995. The WTO regulates trade among participating countries, negotiates trade agreements and provides dispute resolution. During his campaign, Trump had claimed that the U.S. usually lost these disputes: “so many cases – it was ridiculous, we were always losing these cases in almost every case.” By contrast, The Peterson Institute provided statistics showing that the US won more of its cases against China than does China against the United States.<sup>9</sup> By failing to support the appointment of judges to manage adjudication, the Trump administration had already paralyzed the WTO’s dispute resolution mechanism. Then, in June 2020, the U.S. Special Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer proposed a “reset” of the WTO’s operations, forcing other members with high tariffs to lower them.<sup>10</sup>

In a much greater shock to the world economy and the geopolitical relationship of the two greatest military powers, President Trump decided to go after China’s bilateral trade surplus with the United States. Once again, it was clear to the voters who chose Trump that he was serious about China. “China is robbing us blind in trade deficits and stealing our jobs,” tweeted Trump in 2012, “yet our leaders are claiming ‘progress’ SAD!”<sup>11</sup> “We can’t continue to allow China to rape our country,” said Trump at a campaign rally in 2016....“it’s the greatest theft in the history of the world.”<sup>12</sup>

It is important to examine the intricacies of the economic relationship between the U.S. and China. A previous Chinese president – Deng Xiaoping, had begun opening China to foreign investment in 1992, to promote modernization and faster economic growth. Consequentially, China began growing rapidly and ran a trade surplus just after joining the WTO in 2001. That surplus in goods grew from \$33 billion to \$576 billion by 2015. The largest portion of that was the bilateral surplus with the United States, which reached \$419 billion in 2018, accounting for 47% of our trade deficit that year, and 85% of our current account balance.<sup>13</sup>

Trump apparently seemed not to appreciate that in exchange for the dollar outflow, Americans received products at low prices – computers, iPads, flat panel televisions and other electronics, pharmaceuticals, apparel, furniture, raw materials, etc. In fact, this product inflow substantially raised Americans’ standard of living, helped stymie inflation and provided surplus Chinese dollars to buy U.S. treasury bills that financed our fiscal deficits. Trump wanted to “bring manufacturing jobs” back to the U.S. However, since wages in the U.S. (\$22/hour) far surpassed those in developing countries (\$4 or \$5 per hour in China, Mexico and Vietnam), manufacturers saw few incentives to return production to the United States.

Trump launched *the trade war* with China in January 2018, imposing 20% tariffs on washing machines and 30% tariffs on solar panels. In April, he followed suit for steel and aluminum. That summer, he broadened the tariffs specifically on \$34 billion of Chinese goods, expanding it in August by \$16 billion more. In October, he imposed 10% tariffs on \$200 billion worth of imports from China, threatening to raise it in December to 25%. Not surprisingly, the Chinese retaliated, raising their own tariffs on American imports. Negotiations between the United States and China intensified for several months, until May of 2019, when the Chinese abruptly backtracked. Then, an outraged Trump raised the tariffs to 25% and expanded them to even more goods in August. In September, negotiations recommenced, finally leading to a very limited agreement in December of 2019.<sup>14</sup>

The Trump administration had other concerns beyond the trade balance. Chief among these were intellectual property theft; policies which forced U.S. firms to share proprietary technology when investing in China; dumping of underpriced surpluses in the U.S. by state-owned enterprises in China; gate-keeping of financial services and high-tech service; and other infractions of western-style, free trade. This was Chinese industrial policy. It did not comport with the American vision of a free-trade world, but it was the route chosen by China’s government to achieve rapid growth.

After severely damaging both economies, disrupting global supply-chains and precipitating a slowdown in the world economy, the Trump administration signed an “interim” agreement with China on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019. While China did agree to adjustments for domestic institutions involved in technology transfer and cyber-security, the centerpiece was its agreement to purchase \$200 billion more of American goods (relative to the 2017 baseline) by the end of 2021. The largest of these purchases would be agricultural products (corn and soybeans); Trump was especially eager for the political support of Midwestern farmers.<sup>15</sup> Of course, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, China has fallen well behind in its commitments, undermining one of Trump’s major briefs for re-election.

This trade war set the broad economic framework for deterioration of U.S.-China. Trade, of course, was not the only issue. There was technology (Huawei), abuse and cultural genocide of Uyghurs in Xingiang, civil rights in Hong Kong, and weapon sales to Taiwan. Apparently, Trump decided that attacking China on all these dimensions would be politically beneficial as the November 2020 election loomed.

As Trump’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic looked increasingly negligent, he began referring to the virus as the “Chinese disease.” He laid blame on the World Health Organization for not raising an alarm earlier, although he had been briefed as early as January 23<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>16</sup> “Chinese officials ignored their reporting obligations to *the World Health Organization* and pressured the WHO to mislead the world when the virus was first discovered by Chinese authorities,” Trump said. “Countless lives have been taken and profound economic hardship has been inflicted all around the globe.”<sup>17</sup> In May, Trump withdrew the United States from the WHO organization, cutting off its \$400 million annual contribution. Critics pondered Trump’s withdrawal from an international health agency amidst the worst pandemic in a century.

Trump’s withdrawal from the world economy was damaging, and not only to the U.S. His withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear agreement and the Intermediate-Range, Nuclear Forces Agreement threatened regional security in the Middle East and Europe, and potentially set the stage for nuclear war between Russia and the United States.

Iran had long encouraged terrorism in the Middle East, supporting Hamas, Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Israel. In addition to these disruptions, the Obama administration had concern for Iran’s development of both long-range missiles and, potentially, nuclear weapons. For years, Iran was developing its nuclear capabilities in several secret facilities, some of which were enriching uranium to weapons grade. While the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was responsible for investigating these sites, Iran had refused them access to the key enrichment facilities. This destabilized the Middle East, and Iran’s threats to “wipe Israel off the map” were alarming to the United States, which considered Israel a key ally in the region.

Led by then Secretary of State John Kerry, the United States, Germany and four members of the United Nations Security Council (China, France, Russia and the United Kingdom) negotiated with Iran a *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)*, signed in Vienna on July 14, 2015. The agreement (1) reduced the number of centrifuges enriching uranium; (2) capped the level of uranium enrichment; (3) prohibited production of additional centrifuges; (4) capped the uranium stockpile and required sale of excess uranium; (5) converted enrichment at the Fordow research facility; (6) provided for Joint Commission review of research; (7) removed the core of Iran’s Arak reactor; (8) provided for IAEA monitoring and verification; and (9) lifted UN, US and EU sanctions.<sup>18</sup>

On May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018, Trump announced the end of U.S. participation in the Iran deal: “The Iran Deal was one of the worst and most one-sided transactions the [U.S.] has ever entered into.”<sup>19</sup> He cited Israeli intelligence suggesting that Iran entered the JCPOA “in bad faith,” was continuing to sponsor terrorism and developing its missile program. He blamed Kerry and Obama for making a bad deal, and he was particularly critical of the several billion dollars that the Obama administration returned to Iran. Trump thought the European signatories – especially Macron and Merkel – were simply weak. And his National

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Security Advisor, John Bolton, had long supported an aggressive stance towards Iran, including war. “It had taken one month to shred the Iran nuclear deal,” observed Bolton with satisfaction, “showing how easy it was to do once somebody took events in hand.”<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps it was this “success” that encouraged Bolton to tackle a larger nuclear issue – *the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty*. Bolton had wanted to extricate the U.S. from the INF since his days in the George H.W. Bush Administration.<sup>21</sup> According to Bolton, “Russia had been violating the INF Treaty for years, while America stayed in compliance....” The treaty barred missiles and launchers with ranges of more than 500 to 5,500 kilometers. This was designed to prevent a war in Europe, but over time, “the INF’s fundamental purpose was vitiated by persistent Russian breaches, changed global strategic realities, and technological progress.”<sup>22</sup>

After many discussions with the Russians, who repeatedly denied any breach of the INF terms, President Trump announced termination of the agreement on February 1st, 2019:

Violations must have consequences. Nearly six years of diplomacy and more than 30 meetings have failed to convince Russia to return to compliance with the INF Treaty. Enough is enough....Only Russia’s complete and verifiable destruction of its INF-violating missiles, their launchers, and associated equipment can save the INF Treaty...The United States will move forward with developing its own intermediate-range, conventionally-armed, ground-launched missile system. In addition, China and Iran, which are not parties to the Treaty, each possess more than 1,000 INF Treaty-range missiles.<sup>23</sup>

With the START treaty (limiting long-range nuclear warheads and launchers) due to expire in February 2021, it was vital to negotiate a new nuclear-weapons agreement with Russia, and possibly China.<sup>24</sup>

Trump, meanwhile, remained concerned with U.S. troop deployment around the world - in Asia (Taiwan, Korea and Japan), the Middle East (Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq), and Europe. Although he was intensely critical of Obama’s failure to invade Syria, when Assad used chemical weapons, he was determined to pull our remaining troops out of northern Syria. After Assad had essentially prevailed in the Syrian civil war, there remained an area of northern Syria still held by Kurds – the same Kurds who had helped the United States and Iraq defeat the Islamic State.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the president of Turkey who had long fought the PKK – a Turkish terrorist group that wanted Kurdish independence - was deeply critical of the Kurdish troops in northern Syria. At the end of the civil war in 2012, a Kurdish military unit - the YPG (in English, the People’s Protection Units) – worked with the U.S. military to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). By 2017, YPG groups, backed by U.S. air strikes, liberated Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State. Yet when the Turkish military began to occupy the northern Syrian border area, President Erdogan was determined to destroy the Kurdish YPG, which he considered a terrorist affiliate of the PKK.<sup>25</sup>

On October 7<sup>th</sup>, after speaking with Erdogan on the telephone, Trump announced he was *pulling U.S. troops out of Syria*. “I held off this fight for almost 3 years, but it is time for us to get out of these ridiculous Endless Wars, many of them tribal, and bring our soldiers home,” he tweeted.<sup>26</sup> The Turks invaded less than 72 hours later, threatening more than 300,000 Kurds who still held 70,000 ISIS prisoners. The U.S. military establishment was appalled by this decision. Jim Mattis, Trump’s first Defense Secretary, resigned that December in protest of this decision. Nikki Haley, the U.S.’s U.N. Ambassador promptly criticized the decision in a tweet, and Lindsey Graham, Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, called the decision “a disaster in the making.”<sup>27</sup> Of course, this withdrawal from Northern Syria was another part of Trump’s “American First” foreign policy.

Six months later, on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020, Trump announced that the U.S. would *exit the Open Skies Treaty* in six months. The 34-nation agreement allows the U.S., Russia and other countries to fly surveillance aircraft over each other’s territory. “Russia didn’t adhere to the treaty, so until they adhere, we will pull

out,” said Trump. The Department of Defense noted that Russia had “continuously violated its obligations under the Treaty....limiting flight distances over the Kaliningrad Oblast to 500 kilometers (km) and for denying flights within 10 km of portions of the Georgian-Russian border.”<sup>28</sup> However, Representative Eliot Engel, Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, immediately criticized the decision, which “directly harms our country’s security” and further threatened the new START discussions.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, Trump announced withdrawal *of 12,000 troops from the NATO forces in Germany*. Trump’s excuse for this decision, on July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020, was his frequent complaint that European members, and Germany in particular, were not paying their fair share of NATO’s expenses. Trump expected all NATO members to spend 2% of their GDPs on defense. “We don’t want to be the suckers anymore,” Trump told reporters at the White House. “We’re reducing the force because they’re not paying their bills; it’s very simple.”<sup>30</sup> Once again, Trump’s allies in the U.S. Senate were appalled, but as usual, said little.

## *Conclusion*

As the 2020 election approaches, this is the foreign policy of “America First.” Notwithstanding Trump’s ineffective domestic policies (e.g., immigration, federal budget, environmental regulation), and his inadequate response to the COVID-19 pandemic, these withdrawals from global leadership, taken together, will have lasting, if not permanent, consequences for the world order. Just a few years ago, the world order was an American order. True, China had been growing rapidly, gaining economic and political power. And it is also true that not every decision by the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations was wise. But we had an operational relationship with China, were still communicating with Russia, and were leading the world order.

That is no longer the case, and nothing has replaced it. “America First” has alienated our European, North American and Australian allies. It is precipitating a new cold war with China and it is wholly inappropriate for the twenty-first century. It does not reverse globalization; rather, it undermines the economic, institutional and military relationships that held together the modern world under American leadership.

Assuming that it is possible to restore American leadership to its former status, reversing this potentially irreparable damage will likely take years to accomplish.

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## Endnotes

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