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The Problem with Trump's Foreign Policy

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

Critics of Trump's foreign policy have got it backwards. International consensus, international law and UN Security Council resolutions have not produced the post-World War II international order. These are consequences, not causes, of an order produced by the West.

COMMENTARY

CONSIDER THIS general, and generic, recent criticism of the Trump administration's foreign policy from an intelligent and experienced journalist: In the ocean of international relations, "icebergs" have always popped up that threatened the post-World War II world order and sought to dictate a system based on force rather than decisions by the international community. Such decisions are expressed in United Nations conventions on issues like occupied territories, human rights, nuclear proliferation and ballistic missiles.

These icebergs, usually in the form of tyrants in Africa, Asia and South America, have largely melted in the warm currents of the international community under the leadership of the United States and Western Europe. This has happened even though these leaders too sometimes sinned by using arbitrary force. Donald Trump's shirking of the US commitment to the international community's "Gulf Stream" once again leaves international relations to the forces of aggression. The Trump administration even switched sides and became a giant iceberg threatening an ice age on the existing order, which is based on the lessons from the world wars.

Fundamental Flaw: "Three Bases" of World Order Argument

The criticism goes on to define this "Gulf Stream", listing "the three bases of world order — international consensus, international law and UN Security Council

resolutions”. This remark came from an Israeli journalist who writes for Ha’aretz, Shaul Arieli.

Absent his reference to “occupied territories” it could easily have come from virtually any random, reasonably attentive, observer, journalist, or politician in western Europe, or from virtually any random academic ensconced in most American university faculties. The problem with the Trump foreign policy, in short, is that it spurns the norms, multilateral institutions and legal apparatus of the international community.

This view, which goes under the general label of “liberal internationalism”, is today the default template of what passes for the Western intelligentsia — and indeed, one reason that this intelligentsia is understood to be “liberal” is because it takes this view. The liberal internationalist template is not without many critics in the West, notably among policy-oriented scholars and, especially, practitioners of statecraft and diplomacy. Neither is it a monolithic point of view; several variations defined mainly by the scope of its claims may be discerned if one has patience for detailed study.

Whatever the variations, however, the view itself is fundamentally in error; indeed, not a single sentence in Arieli’s foregoing description of the sources and nature of international order is accurate. The main reason is that its advocates have mistaken an aspiration for reality, and by so doing have gotten a basic chunk of causality exactly backwards.

International consensus, international law and UN Security Council resolutions have not produced the post-World War II international order, and what remains of it today. These rarified nouns are consequences, not causes, of an order produced by the advanced democracies of the West, led by the US and girded by American power and reputation.

Trump’s Foolish Errors

The problem with the Trump administration’s foreign policy is not its disparaging attitude toward the United Nations, inherited arms control agreements with the USSR-cum-Russia or Iran, or other international legal instruments such as the Paris Accords on Climate Change. Many of the actions the administration has taken in these regards have been foolish unforced errors driven by some shifting combination of long-stifled pique and domestic political considerations.

But they have been but marginal errors because these are but relatively marginal issues. The real damage that has been done, and it is cumulatively quite serious, has other sources and manifestations.

For example, in recent weeks no fewer than six oil tankers have been attacked by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) units in the Strait of Hormuz, and one British vessel has been seized outright in a commando operation. Never mind for the moment the backstory reasons for Iranian actions, which in the main represent responses to sanctions and sanctions enforcement actions.

What has the Trump administration done about this threat to the flow of energy to the world economy, a common security goods responsibility the US government has undertaken to supply more or less since the British left East of Suez in 1971?

Aside from a tit-for-tat downing of drones, it has done worse than nothing. It volubly “dispatched” a carrier battle group toward the region that was headed there in normal rotation anyway, a cheap trick that fooled no one. The president later let it be known that he called off a limited strike on Iranian/IRGC targets because it might have killed 150 people. The result? Within days an Emirati delegation travelled to Tehran in what must be seen, and has been seen, as classic hedging behaviour.

Within days too, like clockwork, the Russian government proposed a new security structure for the Gulf that would require the removal of all US forces and facilities based in the area. Even in the recent past such a proposal would have been seen by all concerned as propagandistic bluster; today, with the Trump administration seeming to lunge for the exits anyway, that’s not obviously the case.

New Withdrawal Syndrome

The administration has also elevated the stature of North Korea’s Kim Jong-un with predictably pointless summitry, thus rewarding one of the world’s most brutal tyrants in return for, so far, nothing but acrid smoke and cracked mirrors. In the process the president agreed to suspend joint US-South Korean military exercises (subsequently rolled back thanks to the exertions of since-departed US Defence Secretary James Mattis) and opined that he wanted to “bring those troops home”. That sentiment, once expressed by the president of the US, cannot be rolled back.

President Trump also announced, and then sort of un-announced, the withdrawal of all US troops from Syria — a small but effective deployment of 2,000 soldiers that has provided oversized diplomatic leverage in a tough situation. The troops remain, for the time being, but the reputational damage is done.

President Trump has also since authorised talks with the Taliban that presage an abandonment of the current government there no less than the Paris Peace Accords of 1973 presaged abandonment of South Vietnam. One can argue the merits of the decision, but not the image it casts.

President Trump himself has several times cast doubt on US adherence to Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, thus undermining the key pillar of the security and prosperity of Europe. He has also consistently downplayed provocative Russian behaviour for fear that somehow it would delegitimize his election as president, even though the two concerns are logically unrelated.

That in turn can only raise the prospect of green little hybrid men showing up on the soil of some Baltic state, forcing NATO to either resist or essentially collapse. Given NATO’s unanimity rule and the persistence of Turkish membership, it would take a strong US effort to galvanise the alliance into action.

End of Post-War Liberal International Order?

The US president has alienated almost every ally the US has. If systematic Chinese violation of WTO rules is the real problem here — and it is — elemental common sense would have counselled gathering the allies in common cause instead of dissing them.

In recent days President Trump has expressed hope that things will calm down in Hong Kong. “Our Intelligence has informed us that the Chinese Government is moving troops to the border with Hong Kong. Everyone should be calm and safe!”, he tweeted, just hours after having expressed the hope that the “tough situation” would work out “for everybody, including China”. One can imagine the tone of private conversations these days in Taipei.

These words and deeds represent what Richard Haass, president of the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations, has aptly called the abdication of American superpower status.

One ought not to perseverate on Donald Trump, for his rise has been more symptom than cause of current anxieties, international as well as domestic. Much of the same body language of geopolitical retrenchment purveyed the Obama administration’s foreign policy. Though they came from very different focal points on the American political spectrum, they seem to represent a new normal in the sense that they, alone among all US Presidents, have been reticent at best to affirm American exceptionalism.

Some still hold out hope that with the end of the Trump era in American politics, whether sooner or later, things will go back more or less to the way they were, with the US in its own enlightened self-interest providing common security goods to the global order. Alas, just as hope is generally not a policy, this particular hope is not a prospect to bet on.

Finally, what this means, among many other things, is that the institutional sinews of the postwar liberal international order, their associated norms along with them, will surely weaken and decay in time.

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