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Good Foreign Policy Is Invisible

Why Boring Is Better

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In his quest to Make America Great Again by putting America First, U.S. President Donald Trump spent his first weeks in office disrupting relations with allies and adversaries alike. He complained <sup>[1]</sup> to the Australian prime minister about what he called the “dumb deal <sup>[2]</sup>” the United States made in agreeing to relocate approximately 1,250 refugees from Australia to the United States; he suggested to the Mexican president that the United States might help take care of some “tough hombres <sup>[3]</sup>” there; and he declared <sup>[4]</sup> to French President François Hollande that the United States should get its “money back” for its years as NATO’s leader. He apparently also remains determined to enact an executive order temporarily banning immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries despite the early judicial rulings against his efforts.

Micah Zenko and Rebecca Lissner, from the Council on Foreign Relations, have described Trump’s approach to foreign policy as “tactical transactionalism <sup>[5]</sup>,” that is “a foreign-policy framework that seeks discrete wins (or the initial tweet-able impression of them), treats foreign relations bilaterally rather than multidimensionally, and resists the alignment of means and ends that is necessary for effective grand strategy.”

But the problem isn’t just about any one deal. It isn’t even Trump’s lack of an overall grand strategy. The problem is that successful foreign policy is largely invisible. It often means paying up front for benefits that are hard to see until you lose them, or that will only be obvious when you really need them. Sometimes, successful foreign policy even means keeping real victories quiet.

Invisible foreign policy doesn’t appeal to a president who cares about showmanship and flashy successes. Although Trump’s initial storm of activity seems to have calmed in recent days, there is no evidence that he has turned to the kind of quiet, routine actions that make U.S. foreign policy run smoothly. Such efforts are not dramatic, but they are essential, and their absence could severely undermine U.S. interests.

## INVISIBLE BENEFITS ARE BORING

The policies that Trump decries have something in common. Free trade, alliances, and non-splashy diplomacy all come with public costs and less visible benefits. For example, free-trade agreements make it cheaper for everyone to buy consumer goods like televisions; but because such a benefit is spread out among all Americans, any given shopper at Best Buy is not likely to give the free-trade agreements themselves much thought. They certainly notice, however, the costs when a factory closes down in their town.

Trade restrictions have the opposite effect: the “Buy America” policies Trump advocates could increase costs <sup>[6]</sup> for a broad swath of the American public. As has been widely reported, a survey of the ingredients of Trump-branded goods <sup>[7]</sup> reveals that even Trump himself doesn’t think that buying American is always the best deal for American entrepreneurs.

Economists have long understood the concentrated costs and diffuse benefits of trade, which make costs politically salient and benefits harder to sell. Less obvious is that the benefits of alliances and diplomacy are also largely invisible. The only kind of diplomacy Trump ever talks about is deal making, but a better analogy

for most diplomacy [8] is preventive care [9]: it's incremental and it involves tending to allies, trading partners, and other strategically important countries. Alliances and diplomatic relationships are like insurance: however badly you need them in a crisis, you can only access them if you've been paying your premiums all along.

Preventive alliance care is boring but essential. The benefits are hard to measure (although the New York Times recently made a valiant attempt to quantify [10] what the United States gets out of its alliances: we do \$699 billion in trade with our European Union partners alone), but if the alliances disappear, there will be big and obvious costs.

Regular diplomacy [11] also functions this way: most diplomatic visits abroad by the president and secretary of state are not to secure major deals, but rather to reinforce or maintain existing diplomatic partnerships. The apparent marginalization [12] of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson from Trump's decision-making and public diplomacy would make sense only to a president who views diplomacy as marginal.

## THIS ONE WEIRD TRICK HAS GIVEN AMERICA PEACE AND PROSPERITY

Thomas Schelling, the Nobel Prize-winning scholar who passed away late last year [13], noted that all of us tend to prioritize short-term gratification over long-term benefits. This means, as Schelling described [14], that "many of us have little tricks we play on ourselves to make us do the things we ought to do or to keep us from the things we have foresworn."

The liberal international order has been American foreign policy's most important trick for paying attention to the long term (at least since the end of World War II). Elites have agreed that a liberalizing trade environment, a robust network of alliances, and regularized diplomacy provide worthwhile benefits.

In addition to providing benefits that are hard to see, such as the lower costs of goods thanks to trade, this trick also stops policymakers engaging in policies like protectionism that seem like a quick win but can be seriously damaging. The Smoot-Hawley tariff was introduced in 1930 to protect the U.S. economy from foreign competition, but it ended up prolonging the Great Depression. After this dismal experience, the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act (RTAA) [15] changed the institutional blueprint according to which American trade policy was set. The new format helped make protectionism easier to resist by giving the president advance authority from Congress to negotiate trade agreements, lowering the requirement for congressional approval to a simple majority rather than a majority of two-thirds, and tying U.S. tariff reductions to reciprocal foreign tariff cuts, all of which generated [16] increasingly durable political support for free trade.

Alliances and day-to-day diplomacy force policymakers and the public to pay the premiums on insurance policies that they may need when things get tough. They have also helped keep major wars at bay for 70 years, both directly, through good relationships with allies and partners, and indirectly, through the balance of power that strong alliances help reinforce.

This is one reason why Trump's berating [17] of Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was so shocking. Critics—including many former GOP foreign policy officials [18]—pointed out that Australia has been a staunch U.S. ally, contributing troops to nearly all the conflicts in which the United States has been involved since World War I, including the 2003 Iraq War. Australia's contributions to conflicts in Asia—over 17,000 Australians served in the Korean War and over 60,000 in the Vietnam War—are an important reminder of Australia's importance to the United States' future position in Asia in the face of a rising China.

To be sure, most Democratic and Republican foreign policy elites still back a version of the liberal international order, but they need to step up as Trump challenges it. Indeed, there are important pockets of support even within Trump's administration. Both Tillerson and James Mattis, Trump's new secretaries of state and defense, respectively, voiced strong support for NATO during their confirmation hearings, despite the president's assertion [19] that the alliance is "obsolete"; and Vice President Mike Pence voiced strong support for NATO at this year's Munich Security Conference.

## DON'T BLAME THE PUBLIC

Usually, when we worry about domestic support for the international order, we're worried about public opinion (for example, scholars have [20] debated [21] whether [22] public support for the international order has eroded, particularly in an era of partisan polarization). However, Trump's rise is not simply a story of popular revolt against the liberal order. Even people's views about trade, which can affect jobs and wages, do not

necessarily track cleanly with their economic self-interest [23]. Rather, trade preferences often reflect economic or social anxieties—in other words, they are shaped by many of the same forces that drove the presidential vote, rather than by the specifics of trade policy.

Most voters probably weren't thinking much about alliances and diplomacy when they cast their ballots, but even if they had, it's doubtful they would train their fire on longtime U.S. partners, as Trump has done in his first few weeks. Indeed, as the Times reported [24], in a survey conducted just before the revelation of the troublesome Australia call, respondents were asked to rate whether countries were allies or enemies of the United States. Among Republicans, the country that came out top on the list of allies? Australia.

Trump made these issues salient by weaving a campaign narrative [25] around concerns about Americans losing jobs due to free-trade deals and paying too much to support rich allies. He then wrapped these issues up in rhetoric about the most egregious mistakes elites have made in recent years, most notably the Iraq war debacle and the 2008 financial crisis, to seek to convince the public that a new approach was necessary seven decades after the end of World War II.

In short, the source of today's attack on international order is not the public, nor is it partisan elites, but rather it is the president himself, with White House adviser Steve Bannon by his side. All this will severely complicate any efforts to restore faith in the order. It is not merely a problem of better messaging—it will always be difficult to get voters roused about something as abstract as the liberal international order.

Instead, it's up to those elites who still recognize and prioritize the invisible benefits that the system has provided to protect or promote it. Those inside Trump's administration, such as Tillerson, Mattis, and recently appointed National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, as well as their few allies in Congress—particularly in the Republican Party—can play a key part if they are willing to take the risk, and if Trump gives them a hearing.

Someone will have to tell Trump to take a trip to Germany without the expectation of bringing home a deal. Someone will have to remind him that strong alliances with Australia, Japan, and South Korea will be useful if there is a confrontation with China, especially since China itself lacks allies. Someone will have to point out to Trump that trade protection leads to price hikes at Walmart.

These same elites may also have to remind Trump that some foreign policy victories need to stay invisible—that he won't be able to take public credit for some of them. Crisis stability, terrorism prevention, intelligence gathering, and many other aspects of foreign policy are largely about the dogs that didn't bark, the project that takes time to bear fruit, or the story that must stay secret until some day far in the future.

Elites still need to confront the criticisms of the existing order that Trump has exploited. The costs of free trade do fall disproportionately on some Americans; Council on Foreign Relations trade expert Edward Alden has detailed [26] the failure of every administration since John F. Kennedy's to deliver on promised trade adjustment assistance to workers left behind by increasing globalization. NATO allies do need to get serious about spending a minimum of 2 percent of their GDP on defense, as they have pledged to do (only Estonia, Greece, Poland, the United Kingdom and the United States manage)—not because meeting the target would have major defense implications, but rather to maintain political support from NATO's chief benefactor.

The track record of the postwar international order has been written in invisible ink. But it is remarkably strong [27]. If we are not successful in defending it, its benefits may finally become plain to see—precisely because they are gone.

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