# The Paradoxes of American Foreign Policy

*Victor Davis Hanson*

Since 2017 the United States has faced four chief challenges abroad.

One, China has long been convinced that it would be the world's hegemon, and perhaps within two decades. That confident expectation has explained its foreign policy, whether defined by its commercial outlawry, Silk Road neo-imperialism, systematic compromising of influential Western corporate and cultural leaders, aggrandizement in the South China Sea, or efforts to bully U.S. allies in Asia and the Pacific on the premise that their American patron is in steady decline. Beijing's confidence grows from a 1.4 billion population, and the surety that its radical economic expansion will shortly overwhelm that of the European Union and the United States.

Two, Vladimir Putin's Russia has adopted a reductionist policy of being against almost anything the United States is for. Since 2014 Russia has sought to sow chaos in U.S. elections, carved out a new presence in the Middle East, concluded lucrative energy deals with Germany, forged closer ties with China, and sought to persuade Turkey to distance itself from its NATO allies.

Three, Iran during the life of the so-called Iran Nuclear Deal ("The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action") sought to create a crescent of allied states and terrorist groups, such as Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and Iraqi Shiites. Iran harbors grandiose ideas of marginalizing the Persian Gulf Sunni monarchies and of

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intimidating Israel by acquiring nuclear weapons. It seeks greater deterrence by allying with abettors like Russia and China. And it believes it can eventually adjudicate maritime entry and exit into the Persian Gulf, once the United States sees no point in trying to stabilize a nuclear Middle East.

Four, North Korea greeted the incoming Trump administration with the threat that it has a few nuclear-tipped missiles capable of reaching the American West Coast. It would continue to provoke South Korea and Japan, on the subtext that neither was really under the nuclear umbrella of the United States, given its retrenchments and the rise of its own patron, China. In general, North Korea was China's pit bull, who occasionally was let off its leash to terrorize neighbors, as the Chinese feigned worry that it inexplicably got loose.

The "international community" blasted Donald Trump's foreign policy as isolationist. Trump was supposedly an anti-globalist and nationalist who had alienated his allies, disrupted the world's commercial order, alienated China, and undermined transnational organizations and accords.

All of the above might be believable if the United States had not currently maintained 225,000 military personnel overseas, increased its defense budget, kept troops in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, forced NATO to up its contributions and defense readiness, reassured its Asian allies that China would at last be confronted, led the effort to destroy ISIS, negated the flawed Iran deal, restored prior good relations with Israel, stopped North Korea's nuclear saber-rattling, and upped sanctions on Russia.

The result is that these enemies, especially after the COVID-19 disaster, are in far weaker positions than they were in 2017—and likely fared worse from the contagion than did even the United States.

China emerges from the coronavirus epidemic roundly disliked by most of the world, with a number of Western countries vowing to decouple as much as possible from the Chinese economy. Beijing not only infected the world, but sent it into depression, with catastrophic results for its own Belt and Road project clients. Many will not be able to pay for their new Chinese-built infrastructure—and will likely not believe that they should after suffering economic and human losses from the Wuhan virus.

Take also Iran. The beefed-up sanctions have all but destroyed the Iranian economy. It has no money to continue its former generous subsidies to Hezbollah. The regime was wracked in 2019 by popular demonstrations. The United States took out

terrorist architect General Soleimani, who cannot so easily be replaced. The regime's lies about downing a Ukrainian airliner and its inept response to the COVID-19 contagion further alienated the public.

Tehran realizes that its chief patron, China, was largely responsible for introducing the virus into Iran and lied about its genesis and nature. Crashed oil prices have destroyed what little was left of the Iranian economy. In short, most of the Middle East is now aligned against a broke Iran, which has few solvent clients and fewer patrons. It cannot confront the United States as in the past, in fear the Trump administration will simply respond with asymmetrical air strikes that would only further diminish Iran's viability, without much risk to the United States.

The collapse of oil prices, along with the global recession, had ended any idea that Vladimir Putin could reconstruct a Soviet-like presence in the strategically key areas of the world, or had enough resources to check the United States. If anything, Putin may feel it is now wiser to return to a nonaligned status and end his favoritism of China over the United States. As far as the contagion is concerned, the world has been told little, if anything, about the epidemic inside Russia, likely because it was widespread, disruptive, and handled poorly.

No one knows anything either about the current status of North Korea, only that its economic and military provider, China, has lost its global glamor and is failing to displace the United States. Pyongyang fears that if it resumes testing, the United States might respond in ways that it could not counter, and so is not especially eager to experience them.

The Europeans do not, and will not ever, like Trump. But they are also realists and will concede that their enemies are mostly the same—and the latter are weaker and the United States stronger than three years ago. They will accordingly make the necessary adjustments in their policies. The EU can rail all it wishes against a selfish, inward Trumpian America, but, aside from the rhetoric, it accepts that Iran is a declining threat, China at last has been called out, and Russia is broke.

Finally, the United States is in a unique position to rally Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan into a closer alliance to corral China. All have practical and now emotional reasons to stand up to China. Indeed, the chief dangers in 2020–21 are that China, Iran, Russia, and North Korea are increasingly trapped in unsustainable situations and will likely feel that they must take risks before the November 2020 election to alter its outcome.

The next administration, in 2021, should build on the present initiatives that have resulted in far more strategic advantages to the West in general and the United States in particular than did the supposedly popular multilateral efforts of the prior Obama administration. It is a peculiarity of interstate relations—and human nature—that it is hard to appreciate advantages accruing from someone disliked, while admitting that a prior beloved president did such damage to his friends and so little harm to his enemies.

But such are today's paradoxes, and they should offer a lesson for the next president.