

Re-Structuring American Foreign Policy Post-Trump

Written by Morgan Bazilian

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MORGAN BAZILIAN, AUG 6 2020

The foreign policy apparatus of the United States has a significant issue of hubris. It also has a structural problem. The two are deeply intertwined. While a lot can still happen in the next three months, it looks like Joe Biden's team will win the presidency in November. Such a victory would signal not just consent for Biden and the Democratic party, but exhaustion at the last four years of endless dramas and politicization. That wellspring of exhaustion isn't just from Trump, but from the American political system, and a key challenge for Biden will be to demonstrate at the outset he is different. One way to do that is to show that government actually works, and rely on careerists to fill a much larger portion of the foreign policy key positions at the Departments of State, Defense, and Treasury, both domestically and at embassies abroad.

In making changes, a Biden administration should close pay attention to the growing phenomenon of corporate power and greed. That would be good for the republic and any hope of the U.S. regaining its integrity and global standing depends on it. The motivation for these changes, and for addressing short-termism are an ongoing challenge. If there is a genuine desire to bring the U.S. back to the international table, then it will require more than platitudes and strong language against the current approach. It will need to actively restructure the American approach to foreign policy.

The world is ever more interconnected due to, *inter alia*, the ease of travel, globalization, global supply chains, and the internet. Yet, these apparent connections are coupled with several major economies moving towards nationalism, populism, and the associated restrictions of borders and movements of people. The dominant themes in foreign policy relate to "spheres of influence" or great power competition, where several countries tend to dominate sections of the globe, whether through military might or economics. This confluence of issues makes for a very difficult environment to make good decisions *vis-a-vis* other state or non-state actors. The best tools are likely to be a combination of those that embrace uncertainty coupled with humility.

We can try and understand the decision making process in the U.S. by creating a typology of four categories. The structure of the sector has both formal and informal elements:

1. "small p" political operatives and strategists
2. politicians
3. civil and public servants
4. academics and researchers.

The contention here is that category one is the most uniquely American, and the most troublesome. The other categories are common to other jurisdictions, with the IR scholars category being the most marginal to decision-making, but influential in the long-term development of ideas. None of these categories are fixed, formal, or firm, and there is bleeding at the edges of them all.

U.S. civil and public service goes through an enormous and abrupt change every time a new federal administration comes into power. In no other state system is the governing body so disrupted by a change of government. Thousands of people are moved to positions of power at the various departments. These are the political appointees that go far "deeper" into the government (i.e., many levels down in the hierarchy). The people range from lifetime

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political operatives, think tankers, pseudo-academics, and “experts”, to young, inexperienced politically-connected novices. There is limited real oversight on this process, save for a congressional hearing on the appointments of the higher level operatives.

An additional issue with these operatives is that most of them do not have any real experience living or working outside of the U.S. This makes them novices, by definition, in aspects of understanding foreign policy. The ones lacking in humility turn that lack of experience into a defensive coping mechanism in many cases – making dialogue with stakeholders inside and outside of the U.S. government much more difficult and unnecessarily hostile.

Examples of these practices include doling out Ambassadorships to large campaign donors. Another is the young campaign manager for state X, put in at a Deputy Assistant Secretary level with significant oversight of foreign policy importance. The goal for most of the political appointees is a CV boost, and the rights of passage include being called to the Situation Room at the White House for a meeting of great importance. The positions are mostly short-lived – typically not even through a full presidential term.

These structures lend themselves to short-term, politically motivated decision making. They put amateurs in charge of professionals, and tend to have a culture that uses the term “smart” far too often – when what is normally meant as quick-witted, or connected. It also tends to produce far too many clichés, rather than detailed policy prescriptions. As a result, the U.S. delegation at any given negotiation or emergency, whilst taken seriously, as the world’s wealthiest and most powerful country, is also understood to be fickle, focused on political cycles, and unreliable.

There is an ongoing debate throughout the history of political thought on the relative roles and strengths of “amateurism” vs. “professionalism”. The Dewey-Lippman debates of almost 100 years ago gave eloquent text to this important topic. There are advantages and disadvantages of both types, and the prospectively beneficial outcomes of a healthy dynamic tension between political appointees working with seasoned civil and public servants should be acknowledged.

Congress, in concert with a new administration, can start to address these issues with (at least) five steps:

1. Limit political appointments to the level of Under Secretary and above.
2. Stop the practice of ‘paid’ Ambassadorships, as Elizabeth Warren has already outlined.
3. Severely limit political appointees in the national security apparatus (e.g., CIA, and NSA).
4. Provide a more standardized and balanced structure for the NSC.
5. Finally, and more subtly, acknowledge deep uncertainty and the need for humility in specific country engagements, as well as international fora like the G20.

The bulk of these critiques, and solutions, are applicable in the much larger domestic parts of the U.S. Government. In some cases, they are less acute, though, as they are not outward facing or addressing direct issues of peace and conflict. Regardless of where the next administration lands on the role of the U.S. on the global stage, it will be far better served by a cadre of professionals supporting decision-making. Perhaps most critically, it could serve as a precedent for future administrations that might be more inclined to go back to the nepotism-based model of the last four years.

About the author:

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