

The Illusion of Foreign Policy

by George Friedman - November 3, 2020

No matter who becomes America's next president, certain things will follow. The world will wonder what President Donald Trump's foreign policy will be in his second term, or it will wonder what President Joe Biden's foreign policy will be. Alongside this will be the eagerness of those Americans who are interested in the rest of the world wondering what the old or new president's intentions will be. Nowhere will the wonder be greater than in Washington, the one place in the United States that truly cares about foreign policy, in large part because many will be hoping to earn a living off the new – or old – foreign policy.

At best, a foreign policy is a list of intentions. At worst, it is a list of intentions hoping to appear to be a list of intentions, when in fact it is a list the president has no plans of following but which is put forth to hide the fact that the only real goal was winning the election. Taking this position on health care or taxes is dangerous for presidents; it is far less so on foreign policy.

The core problem with foreign policy is not hypocrisy. Rather, it is the irrelevance of a president's intentions. President George W. Bush's foreign policy was redefined on 9/11. His intentions before had nothing to do with his intentions afterward. President John F. Kennedy's broad vision was narrowed considerably in April 1961, three months after his inauguration, at the Bay of Pigs. His failure there narrowed his policy to Cuba, not completely by any means, but as the center of his thoughts and nightmares. President Harry S. Truman's foreign policy pivoted from Europe on June 25, 1950, when South Korea was invaded.

In each case, the president's foreign policy was molded by another country. These are of course stark examples. In a broader sense, American foreign policy is an interaction between the United States and foreign countries. The United States, as a global power, has a vast network of allies, adversaries and others trying to decide which they intend to be. Foreign relations is the interaction of countries that may, and likely will, resist all or part of a foreign policy. Foreign policy, like a war plan, does not survive the first encounter with the world.

President Barack Obama came into office intending to end the hostility between the United States and the Islamic world. He made a speech to the Arab world emphasizing his wishes. It was his policy, but the Islamic world was less than enthused by his vision. Trump intended to withdraw from the Middle East as well, motivated less by altruism than by reducing U.S. exposure. There may be

fewer troops there today, but casualties are still being absorbed.

Intentions, sincere or not, are merely wishes in international dynamics. Specific wishes such as removing nuclear weapons in North Korea fail because North Korea wants to have them, since having them guarantees no one will attack it, and since other countries have nothing to offer North Korea to induce its compliance. A commitment to maintain close relations with Europe falters because Europe is a patchwork of fractious countries, each of which sees the world in a different way. Europe may want closer ties with the United States, but the complexities of mutual accommodation render wishes impossible to carry out.

There are of course more seductive, less focused visions. Kennedy's is the classic: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty." It was a rhetorically superb and seemingly brilliant foreign policy. It was also demented. Paying any price and bearing any burden commits the nation to constantly being prepared to go to war under any circumstances and without any consideration of American interests and, by extension, American lives. In a sense he meant it: involving U.S. troops in Southeast Asia, being prepared to engage the Soviets in Europe and the Chinese in Korea, and so on. It wasn't especially specific, and he died before the specifics and costs could be named.

Bush and Truman are more powerful examples of the limits of a foreign policy and the primacy of geopolitical necessity. In each administration, an enemy took an action to which the United States had to react. Reasonably, neither Bush nor Truman anticipated the moment. But at the moment it occurred, all their wishes were discarded and they faced hard reality. U.S. foreign policy is designed at least as much by foreign countries as it is by presidents and Washington think tanks. The most important moments are those that are planned by an adversary and unanticipated by the president.

The point is that foreign policy assumes that we understand the world and its hidden intentions for us. Instead of creating a framework for responding to the unexpected attack and the unexpected defeat, foreign policy assumes either that experts can shape the world or that broad and impossible guarantees might frighten U.S. enemies.

Bush never anticipated that he would be ordering U.S. troops to Afghanistan. He did not think it because it was unthinkable prior to 9/11. The problem with foreign policy is that by definition it cannot conceive of the inconceivable. And to a global power, with interests everywhere, foreign policy has to be constructed to bear the burden of the unexpected.

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