

The Stability of Foreign Policy Amid Political Chaos

by George Friedman - October 20, 2020

In the 1970s, President Richard Nixon stepped into the political and social chaos wrought by the Johnson administration and compounded it substantially. Hence, when I visited Europe during the late Nixon years, all of the talk was about the decline of the United States. This was partly due to the Vietnam War, but it was also due to political crises such as Watergate. From the European perspective, defeat in a seven-year war, coupled with deep divisions in American politics, could only mean America's decline. (Recall that many Americans continued to support Nixon up until the end, accusing the media and his enemies of trying to bring him down.)

At the same time, Nixon was laying the foundations of a foreign policy that would remain in place until the end of the Cold War. It had three elements. The first was the entente with China. The Vietnam War had weakened the U.S. military. Nixon countered that by entering into a relationship with China. The Chinese had been fighting the Soviets in battles along the Ussuri River. They were as alarmed by the weakening of the United States as were the Europeans. Whatever was secretly agreed to, the Soviets had to assume that it included a degree of coordination.

The second foundation was detente with the Soviet Union. Earlier in the 1960s, the U.S. and the Soviets had played a reckless game. The understanding that was reached with the Soviets did not contradict the relationship with China and, in fact, was built on it. If the U.S. had an understanding with China, the Soviets needed one as well, or else they could be trapped between the U.S. and China. The detente created channels to de-conflict the two countries, and formed an understanding, mostly followed, to avoid conflicts that could escalate into confrontation.

The third foundation was creating a framework for peace between Israel and Egypt that made a conventional Arab-Israeli war impossible. This was precipitated by Egypt and Syria's attack on Israel and the conclusion of a war that required a direct meeting between Egyptian and Israeli officers, with Henry Kissinger present. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was the architect, but the Americans were critical guarantors. This led ultimately to the Camp David Accords, the withdrawal of Israel from Sinai, and the positioning of U.S. troops based in Sinai as a buffer.

The agreement with China remained in place well after Mao Zedong's death. (Arguably, it lasted until very recently.) Detente between Washington and Moscow remained in place until the Soviet Union collapsed. The Egyptian-Israeli agreement continues to be the guarantor of what stability

there is in the region. Much of this emerged over time, but the foundations were laid in the Nixon years, in spite of all the political chaos and the imminence of his impeachment.

Such moments of restructuring do not come often. After the fall of the Soviet Union, a foreign policy of universal understanding that existed under President Bill Clinton collapsed in 2001. Under President George W. Bush, the focus of the United States was on al-Qaida and its potential benefactors. U.S. policy in the rest of the world was largely on autopilot, or shaped to focus on the threat of radical Islam.

It was not until President Barack Obama that the leisure and need for a new foundation was laid. The first foundation was the end of or at least a dramatically reduced U.S. presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a refusal to similarly enter into conflict in the region. The U.S. would remain politically involved but obviously, without a military presence, political involvement meant less. For Obama, the core problem was U.S. exposure to events in the region, not the events themselves.

The second foundation was to confront Russia without risking war with it. In particular, it wanted to limit Russian influence, especially in Europe. This was triggered by the 2008 Russian war with Georgia, a conflict that signaled a dramatic shift in Russian policy. The American response was to impose sanctions on Russia and to support anti-Russian movements in countries like Ukraine.

Finally, on China, Obama initiated a policy of challenging Beijing on matters such as access of U.S. goods to the Chinese market, Chinese manipulation of the value of its currency, and a range of other issues. The Chinese were not cooperative, but during his administration, a series of tense meetings led to open tensions in U.S.-China relations. Obama did not act on these tensions but laid the foundation for events if China remained rigid.

It is not clear how long these foundations will last. Like Obama, President Donald Trump has reduced U.S. military involvement in the Middle East, with some exceptions. He has continued the policy of imposing sanctions while supporting anti-Russia countries such as Poland and Romania. Trump has extended Obama's position on China by imposing tariffs, a move that was considered but not executed by Obama.

As with the Nixon foundation, Obama's foundation was laid at a time when political instability was bubbling beneath the surface, as evidenced by the election of Trump. And it was derived from the pressing agenda facing the nation rather than from whim or ideology. He lifted the U.S. footprint in the Middle East, used limited tools to contain Russia, and confronted China. For all the drama, Trump has simply built on these foundations. Many of his supporters would deny vehemently that

Obama crafted the most important aspects of his policies, just as Trump's enemies would deny that Trump's policies in any way resemble Obama's. But then, President Jimmy Carter really didn't want to admit that the Camp David Accords were spawned by Nixon.

There is what is necessary for a nation's foreign policy and what is necessary for its domestic politics. They create a great tension, which is viewed from the outside as the end of American power. It is actually one of the roots of its power. The foreign policy the U.S. conducts is shaped by the reality of the world. The politics it engages in is based on the social realities. It is hard to see it when it happens. But when we look back at Nixon, and remember that it was a time like ours, we can see it in action. But at a time of mutual loathing and contempt, as there was in the late 1960s and 1970s, the idea that a criminal like Nixon, or his vicious enemies, could act prudently is unacceptable. But in this world some things are impossible and some things are not, and the world is not subtle. No matter how many impossible things are attempted, the most corrupt or virtual soul will eventually try something possible.

There are three points I am making. The first is that the United States' political turmoil is not incompatible with a stable foreign policy. The second is that there is more continuity in foreign policy than might be expected over time. The third is that, two recent examples aside, we have seen such continuity after World War II with intermittent political turmoil. Inside, America might seem to be in flames. Outside, it can be deceptively stable. Obviously, there is an enormous number of other issues on the table at any one time, but few that define generations.

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