Forum: Did “America First” Construct America Irrelevant?

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Abstract: Did “America First” construct America irrelevant? Answering this question has been the subject of much debate in the popular press, the policy community, and scholarly circles. That asked, it is worth remembering that scholars and policymakers have long argued that one of the most enduring and important aspects of the US role in the world is American structural power. Perhaps nowhere has the Trump administration’s approach to world affairs been more notable in perhaps diminishing US structural power than in withdrawing from multilateral forums. On an individual level of analysis, however, Trump’s ever-changing, whiplash style of leadership made allies and adversaries less certain about American actions, intentions, and the direction of future policy trajectories. These issues point to the possibility that such impacts were more about Trump being Trump and less about a decline in American structural power. Only time will tell whether President Biden is able to rebuild from that structural wreckage. With these ideas in mind, the forum editors asked scholars representing diverse voices and perspectives to provide varying analyses of America First, specifically in light of the emergence of multiple global
challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic to racial reckoning through the climate crisis and more. As you will see, each author brings a decidedly different lens to the questions we pose below and also generates divergent analyses of the present and the future.

Resumen: ¿El “America First” (los Estados Unidos primero) produjo que los Estados Unidos sean irrelevantes? La respuesta a esta pregunta ha sido el tema de muchos debates en la prensa popular, la comunidad encargada de crear políticas y los grupos de académicos. Hecha esa pregunta, vale la pena recordar que los académicos y los legisladores han sostenido por mucho tiempo que uno de los aspectos más duraderos e importantes de la función de los EE. UU. en el mundo es el poder estructural estadounidense. Quizás el enfoque de la administración Trump para los asuntos internacionales fue más notable en la posible disminución del poder estructural de los EE. UU. que en la retirada de los foros multilaterales. Sin embargo, en un nivel de análisis individual, el estilo de liderazgo variable e impactante de Trump generó que los aliados y los adversarios estuvieran menos seguros de las medidas e intenciones estadounidenses, y de la dirección de las futuras trayectorias de las políticas. Estas cuestiones señalan la posibilidad de que tales impactos se relacionaron más con Trump siendo Trump y menos con una disminución en el poder estructural de los Estados Unidos. Solo el tiempo indicará si el presidente Biden es capaz de una reconstrucción a partir de dichos restos estructurales. Con estas ideas en mente, los editores del foro les pidieron a los académicos que representan a las distintas voces y perspectivas que proporcionen diferentes análisis del “America First,” específicamente ante el surgimiento de varios desafíos mundiales, desde la pandemia de la COVID-19 hasta el ajuste de cuentas racial y la crisis climática, entre otras cuestiones. Como verá, cada autor aporta una perspectiva sin duda distinta a las cuestiones que planteamos a continuación y también genera análisis divergentes del presente y el futuro.

Résumé: La politique de « l’America First » a-t-elle rendu les États-Unis insignifiants? La réponse à cette question a été le sujet de bien des débats dans la presse populaire, la communauté politique et les cercles de recherche. Cette question étant posée, il est bon de rappeler que des chercheurs et décideurs politiques ont longtemps affirmé que l’un des aspects les plus importants et persistants du rôle des États-Unis dans le monde était le pouvoir structurel américain. C’est peut-être par le retrait des États-Unis des forums multilatéraux que l’approche de l’administration Trump des affaires mondiales a occasionné la diminution potentiellement la plus remarquable du pouvoir structurel des États-Unis. Cependant, à un niveau d’analyse individuel, le style erratique constamment changeant du leadership de Trump a rendu les alliés et les adversaires des États-Unis moins certains des actions, des intentions et de la direction des trajectoires politiques futures du pays. Ces questions mettent en évidence la possibilité que ces impacts étaient davantage dus au fait que Trump était Trump et moins à un déclin du pouvoir structurel américain. Seul le temps nous dira si le Président Biden sera capable de reconstituer ce pouvoir structurel à partir de ses vestiges. Avec ces idées à l’esprit, les éditeurs de cette tribune ont demandé à des chercheurs représentant diverses voix et perspectives de proposer des analyses variées de l’America First, notamment à la lumière de l’émergence de multiples défis mondiaux, de la pandémie de COVID-19 à l’affrontement des problèmes raciaux en passant par la crise climatique et bien d’autres domaines. Comme vous le verrez, chaque auteur apporte un regard résolument différent sur les
Did “America first” (AF) construct America irrelevant? Answering this question has been the subject of much debate in the popular press, the policy community, and scholarly circles. As one recent article states: “[President Trump] openly embrace[d] selfish and insular views of world politics that are rarely expressed so openly in international affairs…. [moreover] Trump’s America First agenda applie[d] a hypercompetitive perspective to evaluate virtually every relationship or issue area, explaining almost all interactions in material and transactional terms” (Mills and Payne 2020, 401). Another argues that Trump’s predilections for white supremacy undermined national security and both American hard and soft power throughout the world (Granieri and Orenstein 2020). Still others point to the negative impact that AF had on the American reputation around the world (Lynch 2020).

In fact, perceptions of the changing American role in the world have been percolating for some time. One report based on interviews in Canada, Mexico, and Myanmar and under the title “I Feel Sorry for Americans” reflects that “[a]mid the pandemic and in the run-up to the presidential election, much of the world is watching the United States with a mix of shock, chagrin and, most of all, bafflement” (Beech 2020). A podcast series hosted by Ben Rhoades (2020), deputy national security advisor during the Obama administration, finds similar sentiments about the abdication of the American role as global leader over the past four years and speculates over what it will take to rebuild relationships and collaboration in a post-Trump world. Critiques of AF such as these abound, especially in the journalistic outlets reacting to the events of the day. However, focusing on views from outside the United States is particularly apropos to research and writing on American foreign policy. As such, the diversity of perspectives laid out in this forum on the prospective deterioration of the American position as world leader brings new ideas to the fore from around the globe. Even without Trump as we move through 2021 and beyond, citizens, policymakers, and scholars alike will be required to “come to terms with fundamental shifts in [the American] global position” that may see a different global role for the future, to quote a recent article by Goldgeier and Jentelson (2020). As such, restoring the American role in the world will take more demonstrative action than President Biden’s declaration that “America is back” delivered at the Munich Security Conference in February 2021 (Sanger, Erlanger, and Cohen 2021).

Although Trump argued for the teaching of American exceptionalism as part of a proposal for renewed patriotic education, AF may well have undermined the
moral and ethical premises upon which American exceptionalism was grounded and has remained a mythic aspect of American foreign policy since the founding of the republic. Moreover, these critiques come at a critical juncture in American politics where the country’s racist history and structural underpinnings are once again under the spotlight because of the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and so many more Black people. This renewed societal focus, the reflective national dialog it has spurred, and the recurrent violent clashes among variable combinations of protestors, counterprotestors, and police are an outgrowth of the tensions that continue to fester, perhaps most especially in the postelection United States. They in turn force one to consider whether the premises of American exceptionalism were ever valid at all. However, if there is one foundational lesson to learn from the confluence of the arguments and events, it is that uniqueness of perspective and perception indeed yield starkly different views of our current global predicaments and their prospective solutions.

In light of these events and social forces more broadly, it is worth remembering that scholars and policymakers have long argued that one of the most enduring and important aspects of the US role in the world is American structural power. Perhaps nowhere has the Trump administration’s approach to world affairs been more successful in diminishing US structural power than in withdrawing from multilateral forums. From the Paris climate accord to general hostility toward the United Nations (UN) and other international organizations, through the suspension of funding and formal notice of withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) during a global pandemic, Trump’s approach significantly impacted the American role in shaping world affairs by withdrawing from organizations and agreements that were forged through an American image of leadership and liberal economic and security structures in the post–World War II era.

Additionally, on an individual level of analysis, Trump’s ever-changing, whiplash style of leadership made allies and adversaries less certain about American actions, intentions, and the direction of future policy trajectories. As a result, that chaotic approach made it harder to execute and maintain coherent, long-term relationships with the United States in a time when its leader might change course a few minutes after one pronouncement or another. Trump’s incoherent and self-contradictory pronouncements on North Korea, Iran, Russia, and their leaders arguably made the globe a much more dangerous, and certainly less predictable, place over the past several years. But these issues also point to the possibility that such impacts were more about Trump being Trump and less about a decline in American structural power. Only time will tell if President Biden is able to rebuild from that structural wreckage.

With these ideas in mind, we have asked scholars representing diverse voices and perspectives to provide varying analyses of AF, specifically in light of the emergence of multiple global challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic to racial reckoning through the climate crisis and more. As you will see, each author brings a decidedly different lens to the questions we pose below and also generates divergent analyses of the present and the future.

As a result, what follows are a set of short essays that shed further light on these considerations as we all struggle to navigate the global community in this highly challenging and fast-paced global political environment. The set of authors has been carefully chosen to address a range of viewpoints substantively, theoretically, and geographically.

Louis Pauly argues that the cooperative governance structures of the post–World War II order imbued with American values need to be adapted and supplemented with new multilateral instruments to tackle a range of complex global challenges in the years immediately ahead. The Trump administration raised the stakes and clarified the essential role for political leadership capable of recovering the pragmatic sensibilities evident in the history of the United States as well as other existing federations. Upon a self-interested but not self-centered foundation, deeper and
more durable forms of political collaboration can and must be built. Chih-yu Shih notes that American exceptionalism cyclically inspires both internationalism and isolationism, but that the new wave of American-centrism inspired by Make America Great Again (MAGA) and AF intervenes internationally to degrade liberalism in service of the United States at the expense of others. Jessica De Alba-Ulloa suggests that US structural power is declining, but still capable of frustrating China’s rise. China has therefore resorted to creating illiberal transnational networks and institutions that contest US influence, including its growing trade and financial connections to Latin America, the US’s traditional sphere of influence.

Shweta Singh interrogates the concept of the female citizen warrior (security mom) to explore the discursive construction of Trump’s notion of AF as gendered and built on exclusions of race, religion, and class used to stoke fear and anxiety through populism and nationalism. Didier Bigo argues that Trump never succeeded in becoming credible internationally as a head of state, leader of the world’s democracies, or even as an acknowledged representative of the United States by other states. At most, he was seen as a predator destroying the symbolic power of the United States and depleting its structural power in a short time. Nizar Messari points out that Trump’s disinterest in democracy expansion and human rights in his foreign policy agenda served as a (reverse) model, such that embattled democracies and nondemocratic US allies saw setbacks in places like Brazil and Morocco.

Jeremy Youde decries Trump’s decision to withdraw from the WHO in light of the United States’ prior leadership in global health through bipartisan institutionalization efforts and financial assistance. He notes that Trump’s views on global health governance were not isolated to COVID-19, but were preceded by similar attitudes on Ebola and President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Kelebogile Zvobgo argues that the Trump administration’s decision to impose sanctions on individuals involved in international criminal court (ICC) investigations of US military and intelligence personnel may counterintuitively bolster the Court’s effectiveness. This is because the Court succeeded in opening an investigation into possible US war crimes in Afghanistan, and potential prosecutions would signal that no country or person is above the law. Emily Jackson, Eric Parajon, and Michael Tierney provide evidence from the Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) Project’s surveys of US IR scholars that demonstrate that they overwhelmingly disapprove of Trump’s foreign policy performance and believe he has damaged the United States’ reputation and ability to lead globally. This is often attributable to his personality, negotiating tactics, and volatility, which introduce a great deal of uncertainty into international affairs. Thus, while Trump has undermined the international order in a short time, Biden may be able to repair the damage.

We hope you find the ideas in these essays as engaging as we do and that they will spur thought on these topics as we move forward. As you work through the essays that follow, please also note that we provided the following brief set of structuring questions for consideration. While not covering every facet of AF either in concept or implementation, we believe that they provided the authors with strong bouncing-off points. Ultimately, the reader will be the judge.

**Central Framing Questions for Consideration**

- Has AF contributed to America irrelevant?
- Has the COVID-19 pandemic exposed American weaknesses and, if so, how?
- How much of recent changes to the American role in the world is due idiosyncratically to Trump?
- Have other countries—both allies and adversaries—found it easier to operate globally with the pullback of the US role?
- Given your research interests, what do you see as the most significant impacts to the global system and the stability of relationships, structures, and interactions?
Did “America First” Construct America Irrelevant?

A New Multilateralism for the Twenty-First Century

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AF was successful in achieving its intended purpose. Many of the “libs” its advocates sought to “own” took the bait and helped fuel simplistic arguments, not least over the revival of isolationism in US foreign policy. Though relatively weaker than it once was, the country remains hard-wired by its own design into dense, border-spanning social and economic networks. Repairing the political foundations supporting those networks remains very much in the national interest. Trump’s legacy makes the task both clearer and more difficult.

On the basis of more reasoned and less emotional debate, Americans can again begin helping existing multilateral organizations adapt and adjust in the face of policy challenges that must be met with others. Even with good will, however, limits on their capacity are now more obvious. Rising demands for collective action across diverse policy arenas are increasingly intricate and extensive, but the mandates and instruments of agencies such as the international monetary fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO), and WHO are too constrained, not least by the exigencies of electoral politics in the United States. New forms of effective power to address peak global risks seem required, and the deeper challenge is to underpin them with a broader sense of legitimacy. The Trump administration encouraged skepticism in the intergovernmentalist dogma of the mid-twentieth century, but it did so without proposing feasible nationalist solutions to wicked problems like pandemics, the proliferation of massively destructive weapons, or climate change. By insisting on its right to veto collective action, it forced even traditional follower states to consider their options, including the option of building new kinds of institutions. Ironically, the administration gave an impetus to pushing beyond the old multilateralism and experimenting with a new multilateralism that abandons the idea that “governance without government” would ever successfully come to grips with certain global problems.

Ever more undeniably, world society is developing and deepening all around us, albeit in fragile natural and political environments (Albert 2016). Especially for a set of peak risks facing it, the new multilateralism must confront more directly the question of how the fiscal benefits of integration and the fiscal burdens of adjustment will be allocated. If such an intuition is not blindly denied, transboundary and multilayered political formations aiming in just such directions begin to come into view (McConaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon 2018). From expanding club gatherings to variously shifting regional fora to more assertive efforts by many states to enhance the extraterritorial application of their laws, new governing experiments are underway. Their sustainability ultimately depends upon both the marshaling of effective power and the negotiations of new understandings on distributive justice. As new political formations emerge, the struggle for legitimacy always follows (Nagel 2005).

The intergovernmental structures underpinning world order during the decades immediately following the Second World War were relatively easy for Americans to accept. Indeed, as John Ruggie (1993, 8) famously explained, the postwar expansion of certain kinds of multilateral arrangements reflected less “American hegemony” than “American hegemony.” The norms and practices of institutions like the IMF promoted core US values and interests. They demanded no deep compromise in American governing practices. Indeed, they often deflected pressures for domestic policy adjustment. Alas, that uniquely permissive era ended before the national election of 2016. Eight years earlier, economic catastrophe was avoided by emergency US actions to blunt the global consequences of its own domestic
mismanagement. Key allies and economic partners collaborated, but doubts about the replicability of the experience soon grew. The abysmal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced skeptical views, as did the continuing strength of Trumpism during and after the November 2020 election.

In the debate on the future of world order, memories of the late 1940s restrict political imaginations. For proponents of a new multilateralism, 1789 provides a better starting point. In that seminal year, Americans reluctantly but seriously began a long process of experimenting with a new form of political authority. Over the previous decade, they had already done the difficult work of reimagining the internal dimension of sovereignty. An adequate degree of collective authority, they concluded, could be shared, contested, and left somewhat ambiguous without losing its substance; it could still promise effective policy responses in the face of clear and present dangers. Fundamental federalist compromises never came easily to thirteen former colonies in the late eighteenth century, nor were their adaptations straightforward for their successors in the wake of a bloody civil war. In the face of clear and present systemic dangers today, the obvious question is whether similar if limited adaptations can be forged beyond established territorial limits without the stimulus of actual catastrophe and political violence.

The profound shock of the First World War in fact revived the old idea of federalist experimentation at the global level (Rosenboim 2017). Alas, the antecedents of Trumpism in the United States and elsewhere, disaster myopia, and a generalized failure of imagination reinterred it. The cataclysm forever linked to the names Auschwitz and Hiroshima then resurrected it a quarter century later. Active participants in subsequent debates were hardly cranks or dreamers, for they had actually witnessed genocidal nationalism and nuclear terror. The Cold War nevertheless relegated their hardly utopian debates to faculty common rooms, where even realists like Hans Morgenthau came to acknowledge the inevitability of some kind of world government in the nuclear age (Scheuerman 2009). After the end of the Cold War, a rough consensus did seem to emerge on the prospects of deeper political integration in the long run (Wendt 2003; Deudney 2007; Archibugi 2008; Beck 2008; Ikenberry 2020).

As Emily Jackson and her colleagues indicate in their essay below, however, close observers of the international scene now express serious concerns. Confidence in the future has been damaged during the past four years, but perhaps not beyond redemption. A sense of the need for greater burden sharing in the near future is gathering. Along with already well-identified wicked problems, there is mounting awareness that massively mounting public and private indebtedness on a global scale will soon require restructuring. On such pressing matters, the question experts ask ever more explicitly is whether inevitable cross-border and cross-policy responses will occur in an orderly (well-governed) way or in a chaotic and much more costly manner.

Supporters of a new multilateralism do not have to believe that the adaptation of existing instruments for joint decision-making, where possible, or the establishment of new quasi-federal instruments, where necessary, is wonderful. They need only to be convinced that every feasible alternative will be worse for themselves. The struggle over precisely these kinds of trade-offs in contemporary Europe suggests the profundity of the challenge facing all of us. It also brings no alternative to mind.

Stand back and look at the historical forces driving actual federal arrangements in history, not only in Europe but around the world. Consider how pragmatists shaped them, reflect on how they accommodate without necessarily resolving all conflicts, and remember how far each remains from the perfectionist ideal of fully effective and legitimate multilevel governance (Rector 2009; Russell 2017; Fossum and Jachtenfuchs 2018). The undeniable fact remains, though, that diverse and fractious societies facing the plausible prospect of imminent catastrophe have sometimes been able reluctantly to acquiesce in the notion that their most fundamental
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rights and responsibilities are complex, ambiguous, and divisible (Grande and Pauly 2005; Weiss 2013).

Skepticism about the immediate prospects for experiments that encompass but go well beyond the limits of extant international organizations remains understandable. But humanity is already deeply implicated in an intricately intertwined and dynamic sharing of power, even if variably across its many forms and centers (Zürn 2018; Adler 2019). Despite the uncertainty always surrounding our species, we must try to learn from the past as we reimagine legitimate political infrastructure capable of facilitating difficult and continuous policy adjustments in the years immediately ahead.

In that effort, Americans in the post-Trump era cannot be irrelevant, for they remain too powerful. In a less concentrated world, however, their inherited habits and dispositions—racial, sectarian, or ideological—can no longer define the outer limits of the possible (Vucetic 2011; Bell 2020). Unavoidably political work is required inside the United States. Infantilism and simplistic reasoning were modeled and taught during the past four years. Americans must again be persuaded that it is in their own collective interest to bring their traditional federalist inclinations to bear in the adaptation and design of systemic policy instruments fit for a new era. They must be reassured anew that sustainable solutions to inextricably shared problems do not require abandoning political autonomy across the board (Kupchan 2020). Donald Trump set back the cause but ultimately proved the point. He set the stage for wiser leaders and better teachers.

The Interventionist Turn of America First

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Dramatized by President Donald Trump’s antagonistic quest to decouple from China during his four-year term, the AF slogan and campaign, revived and enforced by his administration, received a push alongside Brexit amid the rise of national primacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the meanings of AF, albeit usually isolationist in the past, have been evolving contrarily over time and between various ideological threads. Never has AF, whichever brand, pertained to interventionism, though, as prompted by the invocation of MAGA, nor has AF been so prone to illiberalism until it becomes interventionist. However, having been associated with internationalism, an opponent of isolationism, past interventionism typically had an immediate liberal goal to achieve (Desch 2007/8). In a nutshell, the relational constructions of AF are changing—AF and its rivals used to premise their debates upon how to do liberalism but now MAGA is creating a new wave of American-centrism that endeavors to convert the world into serving America at the expense of liberalism.

America In and Out

To explain the trajectory that produces MAGA, a note on American Exceptionalism that inspires all the aforementioned platforms is relevant. American Exceptionalism is an ontological claim in the sense that America is outside of the world, a selected but lonely nation. The United States has always been quasi-exceptionalist in demanding that nations abide by consensual regimes, such as Law of the Sea, the

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1 The author is indebted to Lynn White, Brantly Womack, David Blaney, and Peter Gries for their critical comments on an earlier draft.

2 Many other exceptionalisms are epistemologically and pedagogically accessible to all, embedded in higher knowledge of an ontological essence that allegedly constitutes all, e.g., natural rights, runa, ubuntu, sikbi, engi, dharma, and
Paris Agreement (on gas emissions), and the UNESCO, etc., but the United States can refuse, withdraw, and yet still enforce these at times. For example, although Trump has formally moved to withdraw from the WHO (Youde in this Forum), he continues to call for united sanctions on China’s alleged misinformation concerning the spread of COVID-19. Being undecided on the degree of relating and yet practically inspiring both internationalism and isolationism, Exceptionalism necessarily experiences in-and-out cycles (Holmes 1985; Schlesinger 1986) contingent upon the perceived level of national capability to project America.

The cycles of isolationism and internationalism nevertheless reveal a shared cultural relation denoted by the imagined rights of nature (Crothers 2011), which espouses liberal constitutionalism. Both dread autocracy and monopoly—the ontological threat. Early isolationism alerted AF to “diseased Europenness” and promised to “release democratic energy” in America (Schlesinger 1952). The opposite of isolationism, internationalism encourages US commitment to establishing liberal regimes, combatting authoritarianism, or embodying the responsibility to protect. In fact, the Americanization of the world is built upon the interventionist internationalism that was rife during and after the Second World War, the Cold War, and the War on Terror, with reciprocal treaties and liberal regimes established to connect and reproduce allegedly normal statehood everywhere.

However, AF always emerges wherever intervention at specific sites is aborted or whenever America suffers overstretching. The message, in Boris Johnson’s words during Brexit, is to “take back control” (Menon and Wager 2020). In short, both liberalism and American interests are a priori. It takes Exceptionalism to have your cake and eat it.

Interventions for and against Liberalism

However, the similar slogan of AF can no longer convey the same isolationism following the intensive engagement since World War II because Americanization has resulted in the constitution of America by multilateral governmentality “on the foundation of reciprocal interaction” (Pauly in this Forum). Disengaging is not a solution in such a mutually constituted relationality. The quest for AF would have to take an interventionist turn to ensure that all of the other actors work for the American benefit, rather than leaving America alone, leading to the irony of “uni-multilateralism” whereby a unilateral method is adopted to enforce multilateral rules that mainly benefit America (Norrlof 2010; Shih and Wang 2019). Control substitutes for isolation to substantiate AF. Consequently, MAGA cannot help but commit intensified interventionism.

Preempting escapes from their duties to benefit America, AF in the twenty-first century requires the comprehensive monitoring of nations, NGOs, firms, and individuals. In fact, the Trump Administration celebrated its own determination and capability to adjust rules and standard operating procedures quickly, and impose sanctions beyond borders against noncomplying actors. It relied on a comprehensive partnership to expand the long-armed jurisdiction over the entire world. The challenge of coercing compliance is both short run, as in the surging national primacy and international mistrust likewise experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and also long run, as in the rise of China that provides an alternative to those victims seeking a less interventionary relationship.

Contrary to the interventionary internationalism in the early days, which was intended to promote and install liberal institutions, the interventionism of MAGA comprises the manipulation of the international financial regimes, the deprival of the rights of individuals and firms of those rival nations, and the regulation of market exchanges, whose devastating consequences distribute unevenly between advaita, or Dao (Zhao 2019). For them, all are bound to relate, with no outsider or absolute binary, nor ontological exception.
different colonial pasts, genders, classes, ethnicities, and age groups (Scauso et al. 2020). Only severe national security threats can justify illiberal measures. Therefore, performativity of existential threats and demonization are necessary (Bigo in this Forum). Such constructions must be so extreme that all succumb to the political correctness of nationalism, patriotism, populism, and national narcissism, consent to illiberal practices (Gries 2014), and silence intersectionality (Singh in this Forum). The long-run cost is either the loss of credit for liberalism as a global value or America as a guardian of liberalism. This is the irony of an interventionist AF—illiberalism replaces liberalism to become the common denominator.

**Improbably American**

MAGA nonetheless coalesces partially with others. Its partners’ incentives are multiple and yet occasionally incompatible. In addition to economic incentives, they can further include the ideological incentives concerning particularly the overcoming of Communism or authoritarian resilience, the strategic incentives to confront China or Russia, the relational incentives generally to side with the United States, the emotional incentives to seek spontaneous intimacy, and the civilizational incentives to segregate the perceived alien polities. Far from becoming internationally irrelevant as with isolationism, therefore, MAGA expands, with the support of all kinds of partnerships, its scope of intervention to a wide range of fields. The nascent expansion of long-armed jurisdiction proceeds through cyber security, intensive export control, financial as well as travel sanctions on individuals, execution of anti-American foreign leaders, economic sanctions on nations, cities, and firms, and even the solicitation of involuntary investment.³

The adoption of illiberalism by these interventionary partnerships challenges what AF used to stand. Given the impossibility of disengagement, however, in the long run, such a penetrative intervention to discipline the nonliberal regimes necessarily reproduces the cycles of Exceptionalism, with or without Trumpism. This is also hope for those who want to keep China at a distance (De Alba-Ulloa in this Forum). There are three caveats. First of all, Joseph Biden’s return to multilateralism continues to rely on the imagined threat of illiberal regimes and an implied mission to convert them, thereby outdoing Trumpism that did not seek regime change. Second, each time, the intervention is expected to help to reclaim American leadership and justify American Exceptionalism. Third, the imagined illiberal target is becoming inside America (Jackson, Parajon, and Tierney in this Forum), inasmuch as the improvisation of sanctions in the abovementioned realms of liberal rights undermines both the stability and credibility of the rule of law and, substantively, the rights to which all human beings are, according to liberalism, presumably entitled.

On the one hand, AF forces a realization that neither America enforces liberalism nor does liberalism assume inevitability. On the other hand, the interventionist turn of MAGA testifies to the ontological falsehood of America being exceptional or on the outside. All of us simultaneously constitute America each in different and reciprocal ways per intervention. America as a legal or territorial entity can only represent vanity, obscurity, and uncertainty. Its identity lives on interventionary relations. In terms of giving meaning to the identity category “America,” practicing intervention in the name of American leadership is more important than any specific goal of intervention at the moment of its happening. Making everyone else serve a dubious America is a revelation accordingly—the more seemingly resolute MAGA is, the less the name America, or it being First, can be relationally meaningful.

³Cases of sanctions are wide ranging, including, for example, supporters of the International Criminal Court to investigate the war crimes of the US troops (Zvobgo in this Forum), violators of blockade of North Korea and Iran, suppliers of chips to the 5G company Huawei, and the Chinese officials in charge of the Uyghur affairs, etc.
“America First” or Cohabitation in Latin America

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The United States has been the leader of the free world, the liberal state par excellence, the model for democracy since the end of World War II, but has also been the hegemon, reaching its peak in “the unipolar moment” after the Cold War. Many authors have discussed this concept, its implications, as well as its advantages and perils (see Layne 1993, 2006; Mastanduno 1997; Wohlforth 1999; Monteiro 2011/12). But, just as Krauthammer (1990/1991, 23) mentioned, “[n]o doubt, multipolarity will come in time.”

During this time of unipolarity, or as Reno (2017) puts it, the globalist utopianism, the United States behaved as a liberal hegemon. Since there was no great power competition, there was no challenger to its position in the world. Mearsheimer places the unipolar moment from 1989 to 2016 (see Mearsheimer 2018), after which the United States starts engaging in a balance-of-power behavior. This has more to do with a shift of power, or as many like to put it, an era of US decline, than with the election of Donald J. Trump. Globalist utopianism, or “Mr. Obama’s happy, peaceful and inclusive world without boundaries” (Reno 2017) was confronted with reality: an AF response to the changes in the international order as a recognition that the unipolar moment has passed and the world was slowly entering multipolarity (Bacevich 2017, 63).

Though many authors coincide that the transit to multipolarity is inevitable, there have been different scenarios concerning this change (cf. Schweller and Xiaoyu 2011; Porter 2013; Mearsheimer 2014). It also means structural power, the deeper structural conditions of interaction that are shaped by some states more than others, may be changing. The United States has structural advantages and makes the task of the rising challenger harder than simple relational parity. And, like Kitchen and Cox (2019) observe, when thinking about issues surrounding changes in the balance of power between states, we need to look beyond headline indicators; beyond Trump, the transformation of the world has China as the contender. This will not change with another president in the White House.

Why Are We Here? Globalization and China

Donald Trump arrived at the US presidency under a series of assumptions that gathered support from many sectors of the population. The uneven benefits of globalization, the lack of social mobility, the inequalities, and income divide accumulated and called for consideration of the weariness of the model set since the end of World War II. As Stiglitz (2018, 527) mentions, there was insufficient attention paid to the distributive consequences of globalization and other aspects of economic policy. Thus, although the United States helped create the liberal frame of institutions and trade, and indeed benefited from it, now the model seems in exhaustion.

Although before President Trump’s inauguration foreign leaders including Chinese president Xi Jing Ping declared that they would not let Trump destroy the global rule-based system (Stiglitz 2018, 525), China and Russia have been slowly creating new regional organizations and illiberal transnational networks that compete with older liberal structures and contest US influence. Massive trade and infrastructure initiatives like the “new silk road initiative” or “One Belt, One Road” aim to change the geopolitical landscape (Cooley and Nexon 2020a, 149). Rather than protecting the rule-based system, illiberal powers look for its end in search
of accommodating their interest in increasing their share of power. This translates into a search for new “allies,” like Latin America.

Cohabitation in Latin America?

Throughout history, Latin America was always considered a US sphere of influence, although it has always been very clear that US strategic objectives lay elsewhere. Thus, over the last 200 years US attention to the region has alternated from intense focus to circumspect disinterest. The reasons for this shifting are multiple, but the threat environment adjusted accordingly. Nevertheless, data show that when the United States shifts its focus away from the region, problems emerge. And any form of chaos in the region translates into security threats for the United States (Huey, Rodriguez, and Winstead 2018, 30–31).

Free trade, democracy and governance, and security have been the pillars of US attention to the region, and it has been there where it directs multiple funds and projects. Attention is paid to different issues, linked to the first threat: transnational criminal organizations, which exploit weak levels of governance. The other key threat are extraregional actors, who try to fill the vacuum of US inattention to its neighborhood (Deare 2016; Huey, Rodriguez, and Winstead 2018, 30) with consequences like weakening economies, migration flows, corruption, narcotics trafficking, and anti-US autocrats (Coats 2019, 40–41). Thus, even with different economic and social programs, specific actions like the Merida Initiative with Mexico or the Colombia Plan, the United States focusing on its domestic problems or in other regions of the world, disengagement of Latin America has been present. It was the case after 9/11, despite George W. Bush’s good intentions; it was during the eight-year period of Obama, and it certainly has not changed under the Trump administration, which in its 2018 budget called for cutting the State Department and USAID budgets by 32 percent, including aid to Latin America by 36 percent (see de la Fuente 2017, 9–10). Thus, evidence suggests the argument of the previous essay on the interventionist turn of America because of Trump’s AF does not fit in the region.

Still, the US gravitational weight remains the largest on the continent and in the world. The United States is the main commercial partner and the largest foreign investor in Latin America; as such, many countries are very vulnerable to turns in US trade policy. Central America and the Dominican Republic exports to the United States are more than 40 percent of their total export products. Mexico allocates more than 80 percent of its exports to the United States. Therefore, many leaders in the region have been wanting Trump’s favor, such as Brazil, Mexico, and even Ecuador, without the president’s harsh rhetoric affecting their intentions. However, the geopolitical situation has been slowly changing in the last decade. The hemisphere’s multilateral institutions had already lost their centrality long before Trump. Now, this decline is taking new dimensions, especially with the strident rejection of multilateralism by the president (see the essays here on Human Rights and the WHO). In an effort to not be dependent only on the United States and escape its structural power, for a decade countries of the region have made efforts to diversify their foreign relations, especially concerning economics, a process fueled by globalization in a context where economies of the region are not complementary, but competitive. Intraregional trade captures only 15 percent of the Latin American exports, despite the existence of more than sixty trade agreements in force between the countries of the region (Grynspan 2017, 19–20; Grabendorff 2018, 49).

Thus, the new frame is set: disengagement or a transactional relation from the United States, less influence of the European Union (EU), the crisis of legitimacy of international organizations, and alternative centers of power, of which China is the most obvious example (Long 2018, 164,170; see Laufer 2019; Serbin 2019; Ellis 2020). In Latin America, governments shifting from right to left in search
of growth, stability, and progress have largely failed leaving the doors open to a charmer. China, a “systemic rival” designated as such by the European Commission, shows its growing strength in the region. The new power offers rival conceptions of global order appealing to leaders of weak states (Cooley and Nexon 2020b, 150).

The Asiatic giant is overtly investing large sums of money on infrastructure and lending, creating “predatory” practices that result in “indebtedness and dependence” (cited in Shifter 2018); the total financial commitments of five Latin American countries amount to more than US$133 billion, like Ecuador’s debt over US$6 billion (although on January 14, 2021, the United States provided a loan of $2.8 billion to Ecuador so the country could break ties with Chinese telecommunications firms; this policy is not going to change with the new administration (see Laufer 2019; Orgaz 2019; Ellis 2020; DFC 2021). The Trump administration has adopted a tougher stance on China’s growing presence in the region, which, along with the president’s harsh rhetoric, is likely to further complicate its relations with the different countries, building the very traditional resentment that the majority of countries seem to avoid (except for the “Troika of Tyranny,” Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua).

Since 2017, China has been the main regional partner of South America in exports (that year, exports from the region to China increased by 23 percent and imports by 30 percent). On direct investments, Chinese growth rates exceed those of the EU and also those of the United States. Plus, there is also the proposed creation of a transoceanic transport line to be articulated with the New Silk Road project (Grabendorff 2018; see Long 2018).

The shift in US posture toward multilateral institutions and trade agreements is seen by China as an opportunity “to position itself more assertively in a global leadership role.” The Trump “[a]dministration’s increased willingness to challenge its traditional allies,” especially in a context arising from COVID-19, gives more margin for China “to expand its strategic position, through both medical diplomacy and advances in supply chains, strategic acquisitions, and loans to distressed governments while the West remains economically weakened and politically distracted by its own” difficulties (Ellis 2020, 10). Whether this is translated into a change in the US structural power is yet to be seen.

China has indeed declared its intention to establish itself as an alternative power in the international system opening a multipolar world order with a great margin of leverage to impose on national models of development (Parish Flannery 2017; Shifter 2018). The political strategic situation of the region does not show a sustainable hegemony by the United States; the AF policy needs clear actions to retain its regional hegemony and its geopolitical vision (Merino 2019, 95), by then helping in the development of the whole continent. Taking Latin America for granted and systematically not paying too much attention did not start with president Trump, although it generally “moved toward a more confrontational approach, especially regarding [. . .] irregular immigration.” However, the framework for “policy toward the region focused on three pillars for engagement—economic growth and prosperity, security, and democratic governance[, which are] long-standing regional U.S. policy priorities” (Sullivan 2020, 1). The new administration should involve Latin American countries in opposing China. But for this to happen, a major investment is needed. Secure a beneficial commercial policy, impede the development of rivals that challenge their primacy in technology, strategic companies, and access to natural resources, and use trade negotiation to achieve political-strategic objectives. Democracy must be part of the equation. Or else, the United States would have to deal with the consequences of apretender. Latin American countries will not do better indebted to a dictator. We will be better as associates of a democratic and trustful partner, as the United States should be.
Did “America First” Construct America Irrelevant?

**The Security Mom, and “America First”: A Feminist Intersectional Gaze from India**

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Trump’s call for AF draws attention to not only nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, but also to politics of gendered mobilization, the performative female citizen warrior—*security mom* and her racialized anxiety about safety and well-being, whether at home or abroad. This performative female citizen warrior is neither new, nor novel, or unique to the United States of America, and the parallel of *security mom* or the female citizen warrior can be located for instance in the Hindutva discourse in India (See Basu 1993; Banerjee 2003). While the category of security mom was deployed in 2004 American Presidential elections (See Grewal 2006), the departure point for my analysis is that I put forth the analytical category of female citizen warrior (security mom) as a discursive category to draw attention to the gendered intersection of populism, nationalism with a specific attention to categories like race and religion. In doing so I shed light on the discursive construction of the idea of AF, which is gendered and which rests on various exclusions, like race, religion, and class, and which deploys the security mom as its aggressive citizen warrior, stroking the politics of fear and anxiety.

The *security mom* sees in Trump—a strong masculine man—an ally who will protect her family, and her nation from the illegal migrants and particularly the Islamic terrorist. It is significant to underline that nearly 53 percent of white women voted for Trump. Further analysis of the data indicates that 51 percent of white women with college degrees and 62 percent without college degrees voted for Trump, which indicates his large support base across white working-class women (Rogers 2016). This is despite Trump’s misogynist attitude, his blatant display of hegemonic masculinity, sexism, and disregard for principles of gender equality, freedom, and rights for women. Lindgren (2019, 4) very rightly highlights that “Donald Trump’s presidential campaign drew upon fears of cultural eclipse and displacement by white women by employing a familiar narrative forged by the family values movement in the mid-1970s that linked opposition to abortion with protection of white motherhood, family, and nation.” Closer home in India, the members of *Durga Vahini* (women’s wing of Vishwa Hindu Parishad [VHP]) are a close metaphorical ally of the Republican—security mom whose primary goal is protection of family values (read Hindu identity) and whose primary enemy is the Muslim other.

The rise of populism, the salience of the “nationalist” project (Canovan 2005; Rydgren 2005; Stavrakakis 2005; Mudde 2007; De Cleen 2017) are the subject of growing research and public discourse across regions; however, the linkages between global politics, populism, nationalism, and its gendered intersection(s) like race, religion, class, caste are still underexamined (few exceptions are Dietze and Roth 2020; Eklundh and Knott 2020; Kovala et al. 2018; Chacko 2020). Scholars like Mudde (2004, 543) define, “populism as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.” Further, Mudde (2015, 19), argues that as a “thin-centered ideology, populism seldom exists alone; in most cases, populist actors combine their populism with other ideologies, such as other thin-centered ideologies like nationalism or thick ideologies like socialism.” To scholars, like Ernest Laclau “populism is not constitutive of a type of movement or special social base or a particular ideological orientation but is identifiable with structuring political logic—to be precise, the logic of ‘the people’—rather than an ideology.”
For Laclau (2005), the notion of “the people” is an empty signifier, which can be filled with any specific content. For the purpose of this paper, drawing on Laclau (2005) and De Cleen (2017), I argue that this “political logic” gives form to populism and provides discursive content to “people-as empty signifier,” and further acquires meaning through “exclusionary nationalism.” It is significant to underline that this political logic, exemplified by exclusionary nationalism, becomes the boundary marker to define the nation and the “other”—the enemy. More importantly, both populism and nationalism are sites for gendered symbolism and performances. For instance, Trump uses the political trope of the Muslim immigrant man as the “other,” the enemy, and mobilizes the female citizen warrior in the defense of the nation, legitimizing it through the discursive construction of AF.

Drawing on Yuval-Davis (2003, 11), it can be stated that there are three major dimensions of nationalist projects, which tend to relate in somewhat different ways to gender, which are first, genealogical dimension, with a focus on origin of the people (race); second, cultural dimension, which imbues an “essence” to the character of the nation, drawing on language, religion, or other customs or traditions. This “essence” of the nation becomes an indicator to sort out people into “us” and “them,” and allows for a discursive construction of the “other,” who is the enemy. The third dimension focuses on “citizenship, as determining the boundaries of the nation, and thus relates it directly to notions of state sovereignty and specific territoriality” (For details, see page11). In the process, gendered bodies and sexuality play pivotal roles as the boundary markers of the nation and other collectivities (Yuval-Davis 1980). All three markers can be located in Trump’s populist rhetoric of AF and its performative female citizen subject—the security mom.

An analysis of AF from the standpoint of the discourse of security mom, or more broadly the female citizen warrior is significant for three key reasons: First, it draws attention to gendered intersections of populism, and nationalism, which largely remains under-researched in Trump’s populist rhetoric of AF. Second, it highlights how the female citizen warrior—more specifically the security mom in Trump’s America or for instance the Durga Vahini in India—poses critical challenges for liberal/and intersectional feminism more specifically in the United States of America/India, and more broadly globally. For instance, in both cases, women not only celebrate masculine hegemonic traits, but also push and legitimize a discourse of the “other”—the enemy, either the Black man, or the illegal Muslim “other.” In the process, they legitimize a call for patriarchal family values, nationalist motherhood project, for instance through their consent on anti-abortion policy (in Trump’s America) because for them motherhood is a strategic tool to protect the character of White America, and its culture and values (see Lindgren 2019). Similarly, the Hindu Yuwatis of the Durga Vahini also lay emphasis on Rashtra Dharma (duty toward nation) and Sanskriti (culture) with a focus on preservation of Hindu culture and society.

This populist rhetoric of “othering” is embedded in shades of ethnonationalism and is hostile to feminist politics that seeks redistributive and intersectional justice (Emejulu 2017, 64). While populism is an “anathema” to feminist intersectional politics (as put forth by Emejulu 2017), it also poses a reflexive challenge for feminists and calls for critical scrutiny on why the political imagery (AF) of a populist radical right leader like Trump strikes a chord, but not liberal democratic, intersectional feminist politics? It needs to be noted that 53 percent women (mostly white) supported Trump. This also calls attention for greater feminist scrutiny of women in the radical right movements. For instance, on a comparative note, it will be unfair to view women in the radical right in India for instance Durga Vahini (VHP), Rashtriya Sevika Samiti (RSS), from a monolithic prism of liberal ideas of agency, autonomy, or rights. For instance, many women argue that the discourse of Hindutva has provided them space to not just reclaim political identity, but also agency
within the patriarchal set up of the family and the community (see, for instance, Bedi 2006). So, the challenge remains, how does the liberal/intersectional feminist agenda exclude/or include this discourse given the allegiance to recognizing both difference and dissidence. I do not claim to have answers to these questions, yet the questions demand greater scrutiny.

Third, it is significant to push for comparative, cross-country/regional case analysis of the populist discourse on nationalism, populism, and gender deploying the category of intersectionality. In this case, I draw on Modi’s India and current discourse on Hindutva and nation first. At the outset, I do not claim expertise on the subject of Trump’s AF, but my gaze on Trump’s AF is as an intersectional feminist scholar, located in Modi’s India, still grappling with the challenge that female citizen warriors in Modi (and Sangh Parivar) India poses for intersectional feminist politics. Scholars like Akkerman and Hagelund (2007) highlight the contradictions in the views of populist radical parties on issues of gender equality and the differential treatment meted out to immigrants against the backdrop of assimilationist citizenship policies. It is also significant to underline that there are contradictions in the views of populist radical right parties (as underlined by Akkerman and Hagelund 2007) on issues of marriage laws, genital mutilation, and immigration, which concerns the Muslim Other. Thus, very interestingly Dietze and Roth (2020, 8–9) speak of a “right wing-populist complex,” which calls for an analysis of intersectional constellations, as this right-wing populist complex intersects with categories like race, class, religion, and ethnicity. The case of AF and female citizen warriors (AF) calls for greater intersectional scrutiny, and more so, with a shift in tide, with the now winning of Joe Biden, as I put a full stop to this discussion piece.

**Representing the American people? America First and International Credibility**

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The diverse narratives of AF were certainly crucial to Donald Trump’s campaigns and initial success, but when he came to power, they also crossed the Atlantic as the voices of the American people. This “translation,” unfortunately for him, but perhaps fortunately for the United States, never really worked during his mandate. Europe remained, with the possible exception of the United Kingdom reduced to England, resistant to his mode of government that we can call either populocracy or ultrapatriotism. A gap, some would say a structural contradiction, has emerged between his strategy of conquest of power and internal legitimization on one side and on the other side the interstate legitimization of the “concert of nations,” especially for those states that claim to be governed by the rule of law and respect the norms of liberal democracies. Therefore, the key question for the present is to understand, whether after this episode, the United States, once leader of this group claiming to be liberal democracies, can take back this role?

This question goes beyond any analysis of the claimed charisma of a leader like Donald Trump and his connection with a group claiming to be the “real” people, or with a more structural analysis of success and failure of the different

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1The idea of cross-cutting comparative research, and an intersectional approach to populism, draws from a co-authored paper by Elise Feron and Shweta Singh titled, *Towards an intersectional approach to populism: Comparative perspectives from Finland and India*, which is under review.

2On populocracy (popolocrazia), see Iivo Diamanti and Marc Lazar-Laterzia (2018). On ultrapatriotism, see Bigo et al. (2009).
ultranationalist discourses of sovereignty that many commentators have put forward. Internal explanations lack the point by not taking into account the problem of the international as such and the credibility of any representative of a state. What counts is precisely the link between the capacity to represent the people, to embody what Ernst Kantorowicz called the adequacy between the two bodies of the king (the physical body and the juridical body) (Kantorowicz 2016) and to project it on the international scene as Hans Kelsen has theorized long ago, but which is still so valid (Bernstorff 2010). This old question of the credibility of the head of state both internally and externally, for the conquest of power and for being accepted as worthy, is still haunting contemporary democracies. International Political Sociology has to take seriously this interconnected question of sovereignty, democracy, and the international (Walker 2003). This means to avoid accepting the common answer of an exceptional dimension of the United States, (for the best or the worst) in the world of states, which often reduces causality to internal factors and to highlight on the contrary the theoretical question of the production of the state in its connection with the people in the international scene. Political theory and political sociology have therefore to do a transversal inquiry on the problem of representativeness of spokespersons and to propose explanations of the case of Donald Trump’s difficulties to transcend his leadership into international legitimacy, even if he was the president of the United States, by showing that he is not the first leader to have these problems.

Of course, the result of the election in the United States is creating now a strong hope that the new president Jo Biden will reinstore this credibility through a new multilateralism and a series of international commitments (environment, arms control . . .), but the country is nevertheless strongly divided, and it will always remain a suspicion about the credibility of the United States as a democratic society that belongs to and defends the values of human rights and international norms. We will first look at the legacy of Donald Trump way to govern and second argue that this is not specific to him. In this regard, he has reproduced, at a larger scale, the structural problem that any leader incapable to embody the people of his state and reducing them to his own electorate has when he encounters the international and the symbolic power which is needed for the head of state to speak with authority and credibility.

Donald Trump’s “Legacy” for the Next Presidency and Its International Credibility

Donald Trump in the 2016 elections managed to surprise everyone by evoking the theme of American sovereignty in peril and urgently needed to be restored, a reactionary rhetoric by excellence, but one that had not been used for a long time and which has proven its effectiveness (Hirschman 1991). With the slogans of AF and Make America Great Again, he was able to mobilize part of the white right-wing electorate by pushing many abstentionists to return to vote for him. This contributed to his victory, first in the primaries and in the last round of the 2016 elections. It allowed him to emerge as a leader rather than a president, and this is still playing out now, and perhaps for the time to come. But he did not understand that the very conditions for success of his election, based on a narrow but strong image of what an American citizen is (entrepreneurial, family-oriented, tough in life . . .) revived a certain right wing that had its roots in the years of American omnipotence and superiority as an elected people, but that this same policy, when he had to exercise power, prevented him from embodying the People of “all” America, in all its diversity.

Donald Trump, when president, was certainly powerful, and may be feared by other governments, but he never succeeded in becoming “credible” internationally, that is, in creating what Pierre Bourdieu called an “act of institution” by which

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6See the section of Louis W Pauly: A New Multilateralism for the Twenty-First Century.
power is embodied in a man who represents those who have recognized him as their spokesperson, and as such is recognized also to speak for all the group when he met others (Bourdieu 1991, 2015). This relation to an authority beyond possibility of coercion is a form of symbolic power, where the “magic of the ministry” gives the effective strength of the performativity of the speeches he will give in order to convince populations beyond its own country (Bigo 2011; Barasan and Olsson 2018). Therefore, the function of president abroad and the symbolic power attached to this international dimension of rule of law has been foreign to Donald Trump’s way of thinking and no doubt to that of his electorate. He thought he could rely on its own individual performance, but this is not so important on this arena. It may even be counterproductive to be seen as a good “car seller.” What works internally can be counterproductive externally. Of course, for Donald Trump and its electorate, the fusional dimension of the leader and “his” audience is central and they think that to win a majority is enough to “win the bet” and to gain all the power, even if it means not playing by the rules. But, on the contrary, the ritual of an institutional act of the importance of being president obliges one to sacrifice, to accept compromise, tolerance, reconciliation with previous opponents and the other camp, as well as to speak to the international in a coherent and dignified way.

Adored by his supporters, Donald Trump has thus created by his political style of presenting himself as anti-system, a common disgust, a feeling of “destabilization” at the very heart of the White House, and he certainly represents a part of the American people, but this generates internationally the feeling that he was incapable of assuming the function of head of state and even more of leader of the democracies. This is not to say that, during his mandate, Donald Trump was not powerful in world politics, but he was feared for his strength as a “predator” and his hectic course of actions, giving an image contrasting with a democratic leader.\footnote{See the section of Nizar Messari: America First and Its Costs to Human Rights around the World regarding the “reversing model.”}

Not surprisingly, therefore, when he declared some key elements of the implementation of his agenda at the UN in 2016, many UN general assembly representatives laughed and dared to make fun of him. His special relationship with the North Korean leader certainly did not benefit him. He barely managed to convince European diplomats and political leaders that he was indeed representing the voice of the United States, even when he threatened them with a trade war or to change North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)’s rules of engagement.\footnote{Interviews with UN diplomats done by the author in 2017 and 2018.}

During his term, they always sought “confirmation” of his decisions from their American bureaucratic counterparts. Various interviews show that the personal diplomacy of the tweets had the opposite effect of what he and his entourage expected.\footnote{The small qualitative research I have done on this topic is confirmed by the results of the TRIP project (see the section by Jackson, Parajon, and Tierney)} Far from being a sign of real control of the situation and a personal embodiment of power by a strong man, European bureaucracies considered decisions valid only when a source other than the small group inside the White House confirmed that they were “serious.” In short, he lost the ability to have the last word and to be considered the ultimate responsible. This hermeneutic circle of representation that reinforces the president’s authority as president of the people of the United States has thus collided against his recurring practice of paying little attention to the procedures of a certain “rational” bureaucracy. For many other heads of states, he appeared as an incoherent “amateur” even in those areas where he applied his agenda word for word.

As such, he undermined the status of the United States and Donald Trump’s actions may have created, beyond him, a weakness for his successor. It will be very costly to reconstruct the structural symbolic power of the United States, accumu-
lated over such a long period of time and spent in such a short period of time. The new president will have to ensure that he has a large majority beyond his own party inside the country and he will have to ask to “come back” again into the global community.

In other words, not only has Donald Trump failed to secure the symbolic capital attached to the country itself and remained a party leader, if not an outsider, throughout his tenure, but he has made the United States almost irrelevant in key areas. Was it Donald Trump’s objective, to destroy international credibility of the federal state in order to play “anti-institutional politics” in the strategic local states inside the United States? Maybe. Was it a way for him to do a simulacrum of opposition to any “decent” politics, in order to keep in touch with the electorate who supported him and refuse a global so-called elitist view while caring only about religion and race of the white people? May be also. It was in a way to continue to embody the hatred accumulated against globalization and liberal politics by people who consider they are the victims of the situation. But was this strategy efficient? It seems not. And this is not his own failure; the answer is beyond his case, as we will see.

Winning Election, Representing the Country Internationally: A Structural Problem?

The second question to be examined is therefore to understand whether this situation is due solely to Donald Trump’s personal behavior, to the exceptional situation of the United States, or whether it is a more structural problem due to the conditions of democracy today in different liberal regimes where the mechanisms and qualities for gaining power are increasingly at odds with the rules and effectiveness of the conduct of politics in the world.

This is why it may be useful here to introduce an element of comparison with other situations, because often our American friends and colleagues are a little too quick to consider themselves “exceptional” for what they do, in the best or worst of cases. This gives them a sense of superiority over other nations, whereas they often just follow the path of other parts of the world, but let us admit it with their greater weight, it sometimes has a much greater effect on other countries.

So, if we take a step aside in terms of critical reflexivity, the real issue is not to investigate personal charisma (whether analyzed by Weberian psychologists or sociologists) in one country, but to analyze in different countries the structural conditions by which leaders who succeed in being elected through strategies of simulation of proximity to the people show, once in office, their effective distance from the real population, their lack of gravitas, and their inability to be taken seriously as spokespersons for their institutions and their country when trying to implement their policies.

Donald Trump is clearly not the first to have promoted strategies based on rallying diverse publics to the values of “national identity” against “enemies-others” outside or inside the country, as Regin pointed out in his earlier analysis of Ronald Reagan’s policy (Rogin 1987). This strategy, combined with a media gift learned earlier in their careers, and a discourse of being “great again” had worked before, but not to the same extent. The best comparison to make is then with Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. He must be credited with inventing the same strategy of reviving reactionary values linking the right and the extreme right in order to bring out of their lethargy key segments of voters, often elderly, conservative in terms of moral values, who were no longer voting. He was able to embark them in a narrative of nostalgia for the previous period of greatness, its decline and its possible revival thanks to him. This was also the case of Salvini, who sought to surpass the old master, or of Bolsonaro in Brazil. The list could be continued. In all these cases, the narrative is based on the
success of liberal entrepreneurs who supposedly have proven themselves by earning a lot of money, mastering the codes of media communication, and who are full of hatred against a certain elite who disdained them as incompetent heirs. This story convinced groups of abstentionists to join antisystem positions and vote for them as if they were their natural leader and came from popular roots. However, as many sociologists have explained in detail, these rhetorical movements, often very theatrical, are not based on populism as it existed with Peronism, but rather are the sign of a populocracy, or an ultrapatriotism (Schmidt-Wellenburg and Bernhard 2020) where the ideas of the people and the state from the Enlightenment period are completely distorted by a privatization of the state and the fear of judicial democratic process challenging their leadership (Musso 2019). The people's rhetoric they use is therefore not de facto a rhetoric of the people but a rhetoric of the “duce,” in which the leader himself chooses who is and who is not part of the people by fabricating many internal enemies, including the political adversaries of the moment, instead of representing the actual diversity of the population.

Silvio Berlusconi and Donald Trump, so different in many ways, established this ultrapatriotic populocracy that simulates the reunification of the people(s) while dividing them (not him) even more. It attacks the foundations of a Toquevilian democracy, which functions only through the protection of all minorities by the majority and is wary of partisan authoritarianism. Nevertheless, these new kinds of leaders are considered by some analysts to be great politicians of their time, for their ability to make these structural tensions invisible and to claim that they are unifying and peaceful actors.

In my opinion, they must be put back in their place, even when they seduce voters. Their many “sovereign claims” are more reminiscent of a comedia del arte in a political show, where they generally take on the role of the valet who thinks he is a master, or of the malicious, evil, and antihero “trickster,” than the character of a leader having a serene participation in (democratic) politics. This baroque subversion of the political spectacle leads them to have an audience, to be loved like telenovelas antiheroes, but it does not give them the ability to govern efficiently (Edelman 1988). If so, they will have to move from the antisystem argument and its ultrapatriotic tone to a more global status and a strategy of reconciliation that will immediately disappoint their most ardent supporters. This is unlikely to happen, however. Prisoners of their conditions of coming to power, these right-wing party leaders do not see the difference in status that the transformation of the role of spokesperson in a political campaign into that of leader of a country brings. This is why their trajectory is often marked by a reversal of the dynamic and their initial rise in popularity is transformed into a decline in credibility, first, almost immediately, by their peers at the international level, then by their own governments and even by elected members of their own party, and finally by some of the voters they initially won over, but, as in the case of Berlusconi, this can take several terms and Donald Trump or another member of his camp may be with us for many years. The so-called glass ceiling of the alt-right or ultraright patriotism is not just a question of alliance with other political parties, it comes from this incapacity to reunify the people they have antagonized before and to create reconciliation.

Theoretically, this leads us to remember in conclusion that sovereignty in democratic societies is not a given and cannot be confused with a will to power and acts of authority by a leader. The sovereignty of a democratically elected state is a process of internal recognition through elections, where the minority agrees to recognize the majority as legitimate to govern, and an external process that presupposes the recognition of this sovereignty by other states and an acceptance that this state holds...
its rank. Today, the rules of the game of political credibility are not only national, even for a dominant country like the United States; they are and will be transnational as well. Those who deliberately play against the rules of gravitas, while being in a nonauthoritarian regime, are ultimately delegitimized and discredited. “Foreign Affairs” is important, but in a very different way than some analysts think. They are not marginal subjects. They are the magical operators that confer (or not) the status of “real” president on the person who won the elections. A lesson all presidents must remember.

American First and Its Costs to Human Rights around the World

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A lot has been said and written about the place of human rights in US foreign policy. Consensus is hard to reach on such a topic, but many observers and scholars agree that human rights do not significantly impact decision-making in US foreign policy. When the United States started labeling itself the leader of the free world after the Second World War and more significantly after the end of the Cold War and the partly mainstream narrative on the triumph of Liberal Democracies, the United States has had a discourse in which respecting human rights has held some relevance in foreign relations (Hancock 2007; Hassan and Ralph 2011; Forsythe 2016). Nevertheless, the relevance and influence on decision-making of the discourse on the importance of human rights has varied from one administration to the other, and notwithstanding all the paradoxes and contradictions inherent to the foreign policy of a hegemonic power, by and large, this narrative has remained a constant presence in US foreign policy.12

The argument I make here explores what Boyer and Thies refer to in the introduction to this collection of short essays as the fact that “America First may indeed be undermining the moral and ethical premises upon which American exceptionalism was grounded and has remained a mythic aspect of American foreign policy since the founding of the republic.” Indeed, the evolution of the Trump Administration toward an AF foreign policy has relegated to a very low level of priority the importance of democracy expansion and human rights in US foreign policy, which considerably impacts a very particular set of states in international relations (IR): potentially embattled democracies as well nondemocratic US allies throughout the world. This influence can take two forms: modeling, when other countries emulate the US model, and reverse modeling, when other states, explicitly or implicitly, justify their actions retrospectively with the argument that “if the US can act this way, why shouldn’t we.” Accordingly, in states as varied as the Philippine, Brazil, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco, the diminishing relevance of democracy and human rights in US foreign policy and agenda has given free rein to nondemocratic discourses and actions and has increased the vulnerability of groups that were already under threat. Although a causal link cannot be established between these two tendencies—and, given the importance of internal factors in all those states—I want to shed light here on the importance of exploring the correlation between them in the cases of Brazil, for modeling, and Morocco, for reverse modeling.

A caveat is necessary at this stage: past US administrations, both Democrats and Republicans, have tolerated letting human rights take backstage in foreign policy to the benefit of more pressing interests. For instance, under the mantle of the

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12 Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright considers that making a stand for human rights is an obligation of the United States, even if she admits that the US record is not perfect on that register (Albright 2018, 214).
so-called War on Terror and despite its discourse on expanding democracy in the Middle East and transforming what was referred to as the Greater Middle East into a space of prosperous and peaceful democracies, the Bush administration tolerated and collaborated with regimes that supported its fight against Al Qaeda. More than that, the transformation of the Guantanamo base into an extrajudicial territory where torture was accepted and due process had no place undermined the US moral standing and its ability to condemn human rights abuses in other countries. Under the Obama administration, the initial moments of the Arab Spring were faced by appeals to all parties from the US government for “restraint” and with firm expressions of support to the Mubarak regime in Egypt. The booing of then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during her staged visit to Tahrir Square underlined how unwelcome she was to the eyes of those who were true peaceful democracy fighters in Egypt (Monshipouri 2013). In sum, what Kelebogile Zvobgo presents in this same collection as an important role played by previous US administrations in establishing the ICC was not matched by a strong US adherence to the defense of human rights and democracy.

I will start with how other countries emulate the Trump administration as they consider it a model. In Brazil, the return of an awkward and out-of-sync anticommunist discourse, reminiscent of the Cold War, is accompanied by a defense of Western and Christian values that justify and legitimize a mixed bag of male chauvinist, homophobic, racist, and xenophobic discourse by part of the current Brazilian leadership. The Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ernest Araujo, for instance, published an article in which he portrayed President Trump as the savior of Western civilization from the threats of Globalism and Nihilism (Araujo 2017). According to Araujo’s argument, the West must defend itself against its several enemies, and that defense goes through a cultural counterrevolution of sorts. As a matter of fact, one of the first acts of President Jair Bolsonaro and his Minister of Foreign Affairs on the day of the inauguration of the President was to enact Brazil’s withdrawal from the Treaty of Marrakesh on Migrations, which, as Boyer and Thies’ introduction underlines, is also one of the key characteristics of President Trump’s AF discourse. The argument for the withdrawal was that migration and dealing with foreign migrants should be subject to national policies and not to impositions of multilateral treaties. It was a Brazilian version of “Brazil first,” modeling thus what was taking place in the United States. Since then, Brazil has, in contrast with its traditional foreign policy orientations, followed the lead of the Trump administration on many issues, which has provoked a strong reaction from Brazilian intelligentsia against this new foreign policy. As a matter of fact, this new Brazilian tendency goes in the opposite direction of what Jessica de Alba-Ulloa describes in this same collection as a general disengagement of the United States from Latin America.

Reverse modeling is what takes place in Morocco. Indeed, the crackdown against journalists under shaky and very often disturbing allegations has been documented by NGOs such as Reporters Without Borders over the years. Although limitations to freedom of speech are not a new phenomenon in Morocco as the country has
invariably kept similar bad rankings in the yearly reports of Reporters Without Borders, and has remained over the last decade a partially free country in the Freedom House index, also with very little variations in its ranking, the fact that the arrests of Moroccan journalists is not met by any kind of reaction by the US government provides an extra incentive to Moroccan authorities to continue on that path. It is true that the annual reports of the US State Department on Human Rights mention the abuses against human rights and freedom of speech in Morocco, but the lack of any other form of pressure or condemnation of those abuses makes the State Department annual reports mere lip service to the causes of human rights and freedom of speech. More significantly, US actions or lack thereof also deprive human rights and other opposition organizations in Morocco from the argument that Morocco's image in the West in general, and in the United States in particular, might pay a price if human rights are abused in the country. Finally, the moral high ground that several previous US administrations used to hold has been undermined by the current administration: violent crackdowns on migrants, police abuses, and violence and attacks against the press and journalists in the United States have contributed to the banalization of those acts and their normalization as acceptable actions by governments. The impact of this banalization on countries like Morocco is significant.

In conclusion, my argument is not that the United States is to blame for the attacks against democracy and pluralism in Brazil and against human rights and freedom of speech in Morocco. Developments internal to both countries reflect domestic politics and national debates for which the United States cannot be blamed. However, the discourse of AF has deprived the United States of a moral discourse through which it—the United States—used to provide a model to be emulated by others. Instead of making America irrelevant by looking the other way when it came to human rights abuses, it is turned upside down the relevance of America by making it a favorable push factor for further isolation, unilateralism, and abandoning of universal values by other countries.

The chances of the new Biden foreign policy to reverse these tendencies are real but slim. On the one hand, there is a clear change of tone from the Biden administration, which supports multilateralism and confirms the US engagement in world affairs as well as in the defense of democracy as an ideal and of democratic values. That is very welcome. However, fully backtracking on some of the US commitments made under the Trump administration might be too hard to achieve. The release in late February of a US intelligence report that confirmed the role of the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) in the assassination of the Saudi-born US naturalized journalist Jamal Khashoggi without resulting in clear and unambiguous US sanctions against MBS makes the challenges toward re-establishing the United States as a standard bearer of democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech more evident. In sum, the Biden administration might recuperate US ability to model the human rights and democracy agenda in a relative short period of time, and it has been trying to do so. But reverse modeling might take more time, as recent actions of the United States will continue to justify the ability of some actors to challenge the human rights agenda at little or no cost.
Trump, the World Health Organization, and America’s Shrinking Global Health Leadership

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The US government has been a leader in global health for the last thirty years, but the Trump administration has called that role into question. In the span of a few months, the American government went from praising the WHO’s response to COVID-19 to pulling the United States—one of WHO’s founding members—out of the organization altogether. This is a remarkable turn of events and it calls into question both America’s long-standing commitment to addressing global health and the future of global health governance—something that the Biden administration will need to tackle quickly.

The United States’ role in global health is undeniable and much of what we think of as contemporary global health governance (Harman 2012) is directly tied to American involvement. The International Health Conference of 1946, which created the WHO, met in New York, and the United States was one of the original signatories to the WHO Constitution. Since 1990, the US government has been the largest provider of development assistance for health among all governments each year. In 2019 alone, the US government provided $12.23 billion in development assistance for health—more than 30 percent of the total amount given in that year (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation 2019, 168). The United States has also been the largest single contributor to WHO’s budget, providing roughly 15 percent of WHO’s funding (Joseph and Branswell 2020). Since 2003, the PEPFAR has provided more than $80 billion for HIV/AIDS programs around the world. This makes it both the largest financial commitment to a single disease ever and an encouragement to other governments to increase their own spending (Kaiser Family Foundation 2020). More impressively, global health had been one of the last truly bipartisan issues in American politics. Both Democrats and Republicans have traditionally supported these efforts out of a desire to promote security, a concrete expression of American leadership, or a key element of Christian compassion (Busby 2007; Coons 2017). Freezing American funding for WHO and pulling the country out of an organization it helped to create is a repudiation of this legacy.

The Trump administration’s antipathy toward global health went far beyond its reaction to WHO’s handling of COVID-19. Even before running for president, Trump repeatedly tweeted about the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. He accused the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of spreading misinformation about Ebola, called for Obama to resign for failing to stop the spread, and proclaimed that medical workers who contracted Ebola “must suffer the consequences” and should not be allowed in the United States for treatment (Rupar 2020). Upon taking office, Trump’s aides circulated questionnaires that challenged the value of PEPFAR and called it a “massive, international entitlement program” (Cooper 2017). In every single budget that President Trump has proposed since taking office, he has called for major and sweeping cuts to global health programs (Youde 2018), though Congress has restored many of those proposed cuts. While this would seem to mirror an overall AF approach that discounts multilateralism (Boon 2017), Trump fixated on rooting out cooperative ties on global health issues—a problem that only became more acute during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ironically, Trump’s AF posture in the global health space worked directly against his professed interests. When he announced that the United States would withdraw from WHO, he described the organization as a puppet of the Chinese
government that was biased against American interests (Crowley, Wong, and Swanson 2020). By pulling the United States out of the organization, though, the Trump administration loses its place at the diplomatic table, eliminating its leverage to compel WHO to reform. In many ways, WHO epitomizes the principal–agent problem, with the organizational bureaucracy lacking significant agency while it tries to answer to 194 different member states and their competing interests (Graham 2014; Graham 2017). If the United States is not at the table and is not providing funding, its clout diminishes—especially if none of its traditional allies are supporting its move. Instead, it leaves a vacuum within global health governance—and that is precisely a space that China could fill. The Chinese government has historically had an ambiguous relationship with various global health institutions (Chan 2011), but this could provide the opening for China to play a much larger role while the United States’ influence wanes.

If the United States does actually withdraw from WHO—and this is an entirely unsettled question, given the legal ambiguities around the circumstances under which US law would allow such a move (Galbraith 2020)—the organization is unlikely to disappear. The US government has pulled out of other international organizations like UNESCO (Marwecki 2019), and the organizations have found ways to adapt. One potentially interesting innovation that could come from this is by opening up space for nonstate actors like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) or Doctors Without Borders to play a more formalized role in global health governance (Gostin and Mok 2009). BMGF in particular has come under criticism for its outsized role in global health while not being subject to the sorts of oversight processes that exist within multilateral organizations (McGoey 2015), but it is hard to deny that its financial clout gives it influence within the system (Youde 2013). This could provide a moment for institutional innovation that gives nonstate actors a more serious role in setting global health policy. Re-engaging with WHO could also provide an early opportunity for the Biden Administration to demonstrate its commitment to a multilateral and cooperative approach to global health. American involvement in WHO could also provide the leadership to promote a needed reform process in the organization.

Trump’s AF approach to global health has weakened our standing within global health governance. It reinforced the decline of America’s “international patronage monopoly” that allowed it to structure the international order, establish and maintain international norms, and compel other states to follow its wishes (Cooley and Nexon 2020a). It has increased our collective vulnerability at a time when we are witnessing increased health risks. It has weakened American leadership in a field where it has played an outsized and important role, providing a concrete manifestation of the damages of an AF strategy that prioritizes medical nationalism over a more medical cosmopolitan approach. The end of the Trump presidency will not lead to an automatic resumption of America’s global health leadership. Even with the Biden administration announcing that the United States would rejoin the WHO on its first day in office, there may be skepticism from other states about whether they can count on the US engagement in global health. It will take concerted, conscious action by the Biden administration through re-engaging with international organizations, resuming our global health funding commitments, and proving that we can be trustworthy partners now and in the future.
Stay the Hand of Justice? US Resistance to the International Criminal Court

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The United States, a key architect of global governance institutions in the twentieth century, has moderated its international engagement in the twenty-first century. In climate governance, the United States signed but did not ratify the Kyoto Protocol, then acceded to but ultimately withdrew from the Paris Climate Accord. In trade, the United States entered but later abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership. And in human rights, the United States failed to join core treaties like the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

The United States' withdrawal from these and other international regimes sparks the question: Has AF made America irrelevant? I focus my answer to this question on the United States' refusal to join the ICC, the apogee of the international criminal justice system that it helped build. I argue that, despite the efforts of antiglobalists and rule-of-law obstructionists like Donald Trump, the United States remains relevant to international criminal justice and may yet strengthen it, albeit unintentionally.

From Torchbearer to Laggard: The United States and International Criminal Justice

The United States helped build the architecture of modern international criminal justice, beginning in the 1940s with the Nuremberg and Tokyo tribunals, established to prosecute German and Japanese leaders suspected of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and crimes against peace during the Second World War. The United States' leadership in international justice continued through to the 1990s with the creation of the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, designed to address war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide in the Balkans and Rwanda (Cerone 2007). The United States even helped draft the Rome Statute and President Bill Clinton signed it at the end of his second term. Clinton described the ICC as a means of advancing the principles of accountability and human rights that the nation has historically supported (Amann and Sellers 2002).

When George W. Bush succeeded Clinton, he withdrew the United States' signature from the Rome Statute, citing concerns about US sovereignty and national security. And shortly after the invasion of Iraq and the ensuing war, the Bush administration launched an aggressive campaign against the ICC and ICC member states that did not sign bilateral immunity agreements (BIA). Bush alleged that US personnel would be treated unfairly because of the war in Iraq and, more generally, the “war on terror.” Bush’s BIA conditioned US military and foreign aid on recipient countries agreeing to not turn over US troops to the ICC (Zipprich 2010). Whatever the United States had done for the global justice regime in the twentieth century, it would be AF moving forward: concerns about US national interests eclipsed concerns about international human rights (Sandholtz 2009).

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16 This work was supported by fellowships from the University of Southern California (Provost Fellowship in the Social Sciences) and William & Mary (Global Research Institute Pre-doctoral Fellowship). In addition, this material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program under Grant No. DGE-1144806. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.
The Bush administration’s hostility to the ICC did wane in later years. Senior military officers and US allies criticized the BIA policy and, consequently, many BIA were reversed. The administration also began to see the Court’s utility, at least in terms of investigating allegations of grave abuses in other countries. In this vein, the United States permitted the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to refer the genocide in Darfur, Sudan, to the ICC. To be sure, the United States did not vote in favor of the referral but the country’s abstention was functionally equivalent: the situation in Darfur was referred and an investigation proceeded. For his part, President Barack Obama cautiously supported the ICC when he came to office. Under Obama, the United States supported another UNSC referral, this time regarding possible war crimes and crimes against humanity in Libya following the Arab Uprisings and the fall of Muammar Gaddafi. The Obama administration also provided the ICC resources to locate, arrest, turn over, and prosecute ICC fugitives (American Bar Association 2016; American Non-Governmental Organizations Coalition for the International Criminal Court 2017).

The détente between the United States and the ICC was short lived, however. When Donald Trump assumed the presidency, he and his allies began waging a war on the Court. At this point, the threat of an ICC investigation into alleged abuses by US military and intelligence personnel was no longer an abstract notion. During Trump’s first year in office, the ICC’s chief prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, requested authorization to open an investigation into suspected war crimes in Afghanistan, not only by members of the Taliban and the Afghan National Security Forces, but also by US military and intelligence personnel. The Court’s judges granted Bensouda authorization in March 2020, marking a historic development in international criminal justice: for the first time, US leaders, armed forces, and intelligence professionals face the possibility of international criminal accountability (Zvobgo 2020).

Trump administration officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former National Security Advisor John Bolton, had previously urged, even threatened, interference with ICC proceedings and personnel. And in June 2020, the administration delivered, with Trump declaring a state of emergency and issuing an executive order that imposed sanctions on any individual who is involved in or who supports materially an investigation into the United States or US allies. The executive order outlined some of the most severe and far-reaching sanctions we have seen from this and other administrations.

Trump ordered both diplomatic and economic sanctions, including the freezing of financial assets based in the United States and restrictions on travel. These apply both to individuals directly involved and their relatives—something that we have not often seen, even in sanctions for suspected terrorists. Because of its inclusion of persons who provide material support to the ICC, the order potentially extends to human rights activists and organizations, who often work with the Court in areas like victim outreach and who regularly submit research briefs to the Court. In September 2020, the sanctions regime officially began, with chief prosecutor Bensouda and one of her deputies, Phakiso Mochochoko, as the first targets (UN News 2020).

But do these actions make America irrelevant to the international criminal justice regime? I propose that they actually made America more relevant. Rather than stay the hand of justice, the United States’ escalations may ultimately bolster the Court’s effectiveness. This would not be by design, of course, but rather would be a consequence of the US government’s deafness to the interests of its citizens and to the concerns of various international actors, including US allies who are ICC member states.

\[^{17}\text{Executive order 13,928, June 11, 2020.}\]
\[^{18}\text{Executive order 13,224, September 10, 2019.}\]
The Afghanistan Investigation and the Importance of the United States to the ICC’s Future

The ICC’s investigation into possible war crimes by the United States and non-US personnel in Afghanistan represents an opportunity for the Court to “get things right.” Soon entering its third decade of operation, the beleaguered Court has failed to arrest, prosecute, convict, and sentence most of its targets (International Criminal Court 2020). However, it has managed to do what was previously unthinkable: commence an investigation into one of the most powerful countries in the world—despite the United States not being a party to the Rome Statute, despite the US interference, and even despite some of the Court’s judges. As previously mentioned, chief prosecutor Bensouda requested authorization to open an investigation in Afghanistan in 2017, following a decade-long preliminary examination, which provided a reasonable basis to conclude that American soldiers and intelligence officers had committed war crimes, including “torture, cruel treatment, outrages upon personal dignity, and rape” during interrogations (International Criminal Court 2016). While the United States would normally be outside of the Court’s reach because it is not a member, it is subject to ICC review in this instance because the alleged abuses occurred on the territory of a member, Afghanistan. The ICC’s pretrial chamber rejected Bensouda’s request in April 2019, ostensibly due to pressure from the Trump administration (Amnesty International 2019; Human Rights Watch 2019). However, this controversial decision, which sparked outrage from the global human rights community and ICC member states, was ultimately reversed by the appeals chamber in March 2020—a historic decision that then prompted Trump’s sanctions order in June 2020.

Bensouda undoubtedly knew the stakes: how the ICC deals with the United States will set an important precedent. If US suspects were charged, arrested, prosecuted, and, where guilt was determined, convicted and sentenced, it would put much needed wind in the sails of international justice advocates the world over. It would help improve the ICC’s credibility after a lackluster first two decades and strengthen the institution. It would communicate clearly that no country and no person is beyond the hand of justice. History has been made once and it may yet be made again.

Conclusion

One thing that the Trump administration missed in its AF policy is the reality that many Americans care about US leadership in the world, something President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris zeroed in on their winning campaign. In terms of international justice and the ICC in particular, a majority of Americans support the Court and think that the United States should join, as the Court’s aims reflect US values and may advance US interests like respect for human rights, democratic accountability, and peace (Zvobgo 2019). The government’s position to date does not reflect the public’s position, so historical government hostility toward the Court is not necessarily where the story ends, of note under a new Biden–Harris administration.

The Trump administration’s prior actions vis-à-vis the ICC may even enhance public support for the Court. Trump’s and Republicans’ favorability among the electorate has been on the decline. Biden and Harris’s historic election is evidence of this. Supporting the ICC may be one more way that Americans can oppose Trump and Trumpism, and stem the legacy of anti-globalism and anti-rule of law policies (Zvobgo and Chaudoin 2020). More generally, opposition to Trump policies and administration-sanctioned abuses underlie some people’s support for the Court, as seen in Zvobgo’s (2019) survey data. Among the respondents, one indicated, “I can no longer trust my government to uphold the values we have fought for . . . [a] check on a leader with clear authoritarian tendencies would help”
And so, the United States may yet re-engage, even join, the ICC among a range of international institutions—due in no small part to citizens’ preferences. Joe Biden’s and Kamala Harris’ declared “commitment to advancing human rights and democracy around the world” certainly indicates as much (Joe Biden for President 2020).

Skeptics may opine that the US public may only support the ICC and US membership in the abstract, but that, if American service members and intelligence personnel are actually prosecuted and, where appropriate, convicted, and sentenced by the Court, Americans will not view the Court so favorably. Essentially, Americans may be “exceptionalists”—supporting international criminal justice for others but not for themselves. Thus, the Trump administration’s actions might not backfire and a Biden–Harris administration might not further engage in the international criminal justice regime. This is a possibility. And all published survey data, from interest groups like the American Bar Association and scholars like Simmons (2017) and Zvobgo (2019), predate the now-authorized formal investigation into US personnel in Afghanistan. The investigation (and any future steps toward criminal accountability for Americans) may produce a chilling effect on public opinion. Yet when survey researchers have previously raised the specter of US personnel being implicated in ICC proceedings, this has not significantly changed attitudes. In 2018, the American Bar Association reported:

81% of those polled either did not change their opinion, or became more favorable to the ICC, after they were informed that the Court would potentially investigate alleged crimes committed by members of all groups involved, namely the US military, CIA, Taliban, and Islamic State. Specifically, 50% of all Americans said that this information did not change their opinion of the ICC; 31% said it made their opinion of the ICC much or somewhat more favorable; 19% said it made their opinion of the Court much or somewhat less favorable. (American Bar Association 2018)

Americans are less concerned with US personnel being investigated and prosecuted than they are with the process being fair (Zvobgo 2019). This essay invites additional theoretical and empirical research on what issue frames can alter public opinion toward or against international accountability for serious crimes, as there are many considerations that may shape US public opinion as the Afghanistan investigation proceeds. These include arguments about fundamental fairness at the Court, as well as human rights and national interest arguments, partisan cues, and judgments about the Court’s effectiveness.

Experts Agree: Trump’s Foreign Policy Was a Disaster. But Is the Damage Lasting?

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With former President Donald Trump’s time in office at an end and much of the world anxiously awaiting President Joseph Biden’s policy shifts, it is a good time to take stock of Trump’s foreign policy actions and their likely implications for the
future of international cooperation and US leadership. Trump’s approach to foreign policy reflects an oft-expressed commitment to put AF, but IR experts believe that this approach has damaged the United States’ reputation abroad and damaged its ability to organize multilateral cooperation. In this essay, we leverage survey data from the TRIP Project to address these questions. Instead of providing a single expert’s opinion on Trump’s foreign policy and the future of the global order, these data allow us to provide the aggregated view of an expert community. While US IR scholars disagree on many academic and policy issues, the consensus is clear when it comes to Trump. Scholars overwhelmingly disapprove of Trump’s foreign policy performance and believe his actions have damaged America’s reputation abroad and its ability to lead multilateral initiatives. If a Biden administration reaffirms a commitment to multilateralism, the United States may be able to maintain a strong leadership position, but it will be no easy task.

**TRIP Data**

The TRIP Project conducts regular “snap polls” about contemporary issues to provide real-time data on the views of IR experts. One purpose of snap polls is to measure and disseminate information on expert opinion so that these views may inform public discourse and policy debates. For some forecasting questions, snap polls provide the public and practitioners with the “wisdom of expert crowds,” which may be more accurate than the predictions of individual experts (Surowiecki 2005). To date the TRIP project has identified 4,983 scholars who research and/or teach IR at US colleges or universities. In this essay, we primarily rely on data from the eleventh, thirteenth, and fourteenth snap polls, fielded in October of 2018, April of 2020, and September of 2020, respectively (Parajon et al. 2018; Entringer Garcia Blanes et al. 2020; Jackson et al. 2020).

**Results**

In all of our surveys conducted during Trump’s time in office, scholars expressed deep skepticism of Trump’s foreign policy performance and its impact on America’s reputation. Two years into his presidency, 93 percent of scholars believed that the United States was “less respected” internationally compared to the past. Seventy-eight percent of those individuals also concluded that this was a “major problem.” When asked a follow-up about why they believed the United States was less respected on the world stage, an overwhelming majority (80 percent) directly blamed the Trump administration, emphasizing the president’s rhetoric or personal behavior.

In the same survey, we asked scholars about Trump’s negotiating tactics. Trump is noted for his unpredictable, sometimes volatile behavior and policy decisions (Druckman 2019; Boyer and Thies, this issue). On the campaign trail in 2016, he said, “We have to be unpredictable starting now” (Transcript 2016). When we asked scholars whether “unpredictable behavior has been an effective negotiation tactic,” 81 percent disagreed with the idea that this has been an effective tactic.

Trump’s penchant for unpredictable and unorthodox behavior extends to the US response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast to Trump’s policy, only 1.6 percent of scholars agreed that the United States should “eliminate financial support to the WHO” (Jackson et al. 2020).

When asked how Trump’s policy responses to COVID-19 would shape perceptions of the United States abroad, the responses were overwhelmingly negative. Scholars predict that among both foreign publics and foreign leaders the United States is less likely to be seen as a state that: “is willing to help provide global public goods” (92.6 percent among foreign publics), “honors its international commitments” (85.2 percent), and “is widely respected in the international system” (91.7 percent).
Scholars also believe that the US response to COVID-19 will negatively impact respect for the United States. But reputation is perceived as qualitatively different from power; even if other countries do not look to the United States for leadership during the current crisis or the next one, there is little consensus about whether the pandemic will fundamentally alter the structure of global politics. A majority of scholars do not expect to see the global distribution of power change as a result of COVID-19, but a sizable minority (32 percent) does expect such a structural change.

**Will the Damage to America’s Reputation Last?**

IR theory (and not just realist theory) provides good reasons to be pessimistic about the future of multilateral cooperation, even with Trump out of office and the threat of COVID-19 receding in 2021. Multilateral cooperation rests on the credible commitments of partners to keep their promises, and this is especially important for hegemonic powers (Kindelberger 1973; Schelling 1991). Commitments shape the expectations of states about the future behavior of the hegemon, which incentivize these states to invest resources and change their own behavior in pursuit of joint gains based on the hegemon’s promises. The most relevant clue to future behavior is previous behavior (Axelrod 1984). As other essays in this forum illustrate, the record of the United States in keeping its commitments over the past three years has been abysmal (see Youde, this issue). Why trust the United States and potentially get burned again, especially since the recent US presidential election was closer than expected?

Further, theories that focus on domestic (Cowhey 1993; Martin 2000) or international (Keohane 1984; Ruggie 1993) institutions as sticky constraints on sudden behavioral changes by the hegemon have proven rather weak in the face of a US president who wants to take the country in a different direction. Surely potential partners recognize that US commitments are not as credible and sticky as once believed. Thus, we should be skeptical about a return to the pre-Trump status quo.

Experts agree that Trump’s actions, rhetoric, and behavior have damaged the reputation of the United States. Scholars also disapprove of the administration’s handling of the international response to COVID-19 and believe that the failed US response (and the legacy of Trump) will damage America’s ability to organize multilateral cooperative initiatives. Will this damage be long lasting and significant?

Maybe not. If President Biden strongly reaffirms US commitments to various multilateral arrangements and enshrines these commitments in domestic law, then perhaps other states will trust the United States and again embrace multilateral cooperation. After all, IR scholars, the American public, and other groups of US elites agree that multilateralism benefits the United States across all issue areas (Smeltz et al. 2017). This can be seen in public and elite support for security alliances like NATO, free trade agreements like North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), public health organizations like the WHO, and international justice mechanisms like the ICC (Parajon et al. 2018; Zvogbo, this issue).

Biden has expressed strong support for multilateralism on all these fronts, and he was quick to signal his commitment to working with allies on a coordinated response to global issues (Council on Foreign Relations 2020; Ordonez 2020). Biden has indicated that early in his term he will prioritize rejoining the Paris climate accords, loosening restrictions on refugees seeking asylum, and rejoining the WHO (Viser et al. 2020). So if multilateral cooperation is good for the United States (according to these experts) and a Biden presidency is committed to this form of cooperation, it is unsurprising that prior to the election, 93 percent of IR scholars preferred Biden to Trump, and 90 percent believe that the United States would be “more respected” internationally if Biden were elected in 2020.

Just days after being declared president-elect, Biden communicated to foreign leaders that “America is back,” emphasized transatlantic ties that Trump derided, and signaled his intention to pursue a multilateral response to key global issues.
Scholars expect allies to be receptive: 92 percent of scholars expect foreign governments to be more willing to cooperate with the United States under a Biden administration (Entringer Garcia Blanes et al. 2020). However, a Biden administration will certainly face emboldened competitors, such as China, with their own collaborative initiatives on offer (Campbell and Doshi 2020). As De Alba-Ulloa and Youde note in this issue, the United States’ shift away from multilateralism during the Trump presidency presents China with an “opportunity to position itself in a global leadership role.” But partnering with an illiberal leader is risky. De Alba-Ulloa writes from a Latin American perspective, but her insight applies more broadly: “Latin America will not do better indebted to a dictator. We will be better as associates of a democratic and trustful partner, as the US should be.”

Future multilateral cooperation will certainly benefit from US engagement, even if involvement by an internationalist president is constrained by a Congress skeptical of multilateral endeavors in areas such as arms control, climate change, and international criminal law (Parker and Karlsson 2018). Our concern, which is shared by the vast majority of IR scholars (Milner et al. 2020), is that future US obstruction of multilateral initiatives in the areas of trade, immigration, development assistance, and global public health could be devastating to global welfare.

The United States remains a global power, but a foreign policy that fluctuates between a nationalist and an internationalist posture in short spurts would undermine efforts at sustainable multilateral cooperation on a global scale. US leadership may not be a sufficient condition for a stable global order, but its active participation is likely a necessary one. As we have witnessed in the United States, when the stability of institutions comes into question, it can inhibit the conditions necessary for mutual cooperation. Individual leaders can matter a great deal in IR, more than most IR scholars imagined until recently (Holmes, Jordan, and Parajon 2021), and the damage they can do to previously stable institutions can be substantial and long lasting. Donald Trump’s administration undermined the international order in less than four years. Rebuilding it will likely be an arduous task for Joe Biden and presidents to come.

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