

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST
FOREIGN POLICY'S ROLE IN THE 2020 ELECTION

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PROCEEDINGS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. From Russia, China and the Middle East to trade wars, climate change and terrorism, global affairs have rarely seen as complex as dangerous as they have been over the last few years. But does foreign policy matter in the 2020 presidential election?

To address this question, I invited Brookings expert Tom Wright to join me on the program. Wright is a senior fellow in foreign policy at Brookings and the Director of the Center on the United States and Europe. In the conversation, Wright takes on the age old question of whether foreign policy issues matter to voters in presidential campaigns. And also discusses what America's relations with the world could look like under a second Trump administration or under a new Biden administration.

You can follow the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter @policypodcasts to get information about and links to all our shows including Dollar and Sense: The Brookings trade podcast, The Current, and our Events podcast. Well, Tom, welcome back to the Brookings Cafeteria podcast.

WRIGHT: Thank you.

DEWS: It's nice to see you in these parlous times. I want to start with a question that we recorded back in the Spring from a student that is still very much relevant to the conversation we had today about foreign policy in U.S. presidential elections. And here, let me play it for you.

QUESTIONER: Hi. My name is Grayson and I go to school at the University of Texas at Austin. My question is, given the President's important role in shaping foreign affairs, why hasn't foreign policy been a bigger part of presidential election conversations?

WRIGHT: Yeah, well it's a great question. I think the short answer is that there's just so

many things going on that amongst the voters, I think, foreign policy does not sort of rise to the top of the agenda. So, when you have a series of debates and we're recording this obviously a week after the first debate, we don't know if there will be a second debate or Trump's health condition. But the moderators have to pack a lot into that.

And unfortunately for those of us who look at foreign policy, it wasn't addressed at all in the first debate. It's meant to be addressed in the second or third but I don't think it will be a major part because we have an international pandemic that is wreaking havoc with the country. Very severe recession, possibly the worst since the 1929 to '33 Great Depression and almost a constitutional crisis. Questions about the election, whether or not there will be peaceful transfer of power.

So, I think that foreign policy questions, you know, they're always marginalized. I think in this occasion they've really been crowded out. We try to compensate for that, of course, at Brookings and other places by writing about it and talking about it. But I don't think it's what the voters will be making their decision on for the most part.

Although Trump's role in the world the way in which he interacts with others, I think that is on the agenda, it is on the ballot. But more specific questions, much as I would like to see them raised, I think, you know, are unlikely to be prominent.

DEWS: I definitely want to dive deeply into those questions about what a Trump foreign policy in a second term would look like versus a Biden foreign policy if he wins the election, in just a moment. But kind of back to this general question of foreign policy issues in presidential elections.

Would voters be more likely to respond to issues that have to do with alliances and governance and treaties, you know, international relations kind of issues, the U.S.'s standing in

the world. Or insofar as voters do respond to these issues in elections, is it more about threats and conflicts, trade wars even.

WRIGHT: Certainly, on occasion in the past, it has something to do with external threats. In 2004, a few days before the election, Osama Bin Laden released a video that was widely seen as helping George W. Bush because it reminded them about the terrorist threat and Bush had an advantage on that at the time. So, that does happen.

I think on this occasion it's a little bit different, I think. So, I think what's happening in terms of how people factor foreign policy in is you like President Trump's style and you like the fact that he is waging a struggle against experts and Washington and upsetting people like me and generally pushing back against what he will call the deep state and all of that. And questioning alliances and trade deals.

On the international aspect to that, you're probably like too, right. You like the fact that he's saying the U.S. is getting ripped off and that he's not getting along with Merkel. And so, it's all part of a package which is basically Trump the rebel and Trump's sort of the disrupter.

And if you don't like that and you think Trump is a terrible president because he's playing fast and loose with American democracy and he's not behaving presidentially in office and he's not having a due process on domestic policy or lethal matters, then you're probably also in the camp that says, I really don't like the way he's treating the allies. I really don't like the way he's playing fast and loose with the Liberal International Order and that he's breaking loose of all these constraints.

So, I think depending on where you come down, when you see something he does internationally, it's probably sort of a (inaudible) test in terms of how you interpret it. And then those international events as foreign policy feeds into that domestic politics and the voting

decision. So, it's all sort of part of a narrative on one side or the other side.

DEWS: Well, to go back to what you said a few minutes ago about the debate, the presidential debate that we saw last week now had almost no mention of foreign policy. I think China may have come up one time but only in reference to the coronavirus pandemic.

Are there any issues, I mean, maybe it's China or maybe it's Russia that you think even remotely are affecting the presidential election? Or is it more of this what you're talking about kind of like a larger voter perception of well, I already like Trump and I like what he's doing so I'm going to stick with him or I prefer a change with Biden. I mean, are there really issues that people are going to look at relations with Russia or relations with China and I'm going to base my vote on that.

WRIGHT: Yeah, I think it depends on how you code the coronavirus, you know, because the coronavirus could be categorized as a foreign policy issue. It came from abroad, pandemics have long been listed along with terrorism and climate change and nuclear proliferation as one of those transnational challenges. It normally falls within the national security foreign policy arena. I mean obviously it's a big public health component too but it tended to be discussed before it happened more on the foreign policy side then it did on the domestic policy side.

And, you know, if one accepts that then the argument will be that this international event has completely upended the election and how President Trump has handled it internationally has affected his standing domestically. So, imagine if he not only were to be more on top of it at home but was to rally the international community and the U.S. is chairing the G7 this year.

It was to bring the G7 together and have a coordinated response and work in lock step with Merkel and Johnson and others. Morrison in terms of Abe on the response to the virus maybe it would look pretty different. But instead by investing most of his foreign policy efforts in the

virus and what to name it and to try to name it after China and to highlight other countries doing badly is a sign that the U.S. is doing better. All of that, I think has damaged him.

So again, I think it depends how you interpret it. But you could make the argument that foreign policy is a major part of the election, precisely because of the pandemic. Although obviously, that's mainly because it's wreaking havoc domestically.

DEWS: So, if there is another debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump and if one of the themes is foreign policy issues, imagine if you were to be advising President Trump on preparing for the debate. How would you advise him to talk about the successes of his foreign policy over the last three and a half years?

WRIGHT: Well, firstly I don't think he listens to advice from anyone. He definitely wouldn't listen to it from me. I can say what I think he'll say and also what I think will happen maybe if he were to be re-elected.

I think he would say that the U.S. is getting ripped off by the rest of the world. That previous leaders were idiots and didn't know what they were doing and that he was the first one to stand up and to push back. And that he basically created leverage that he then used to cut these deals which are amazing for America and the U.S. should take care of itself and not looking after allies and others and he's purely transactional.

And he'd point to the agreement of normalization between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain as a sign of his deal making powers and the withdraw from Afghanistan, partial withdraw from Afghanistan and the new trade deal with Canada and Mexico. Maybe not so much about the one about China because of the coronavirus but he previously would have mentioned that. And he'd basically say look, you may think I'm crazy but I'm fighting on your behalf and I'm going to cook the best deal we possibly can get, right.

Now I think that before the coronavirus and I had written this at the time, I think his main objective since last September, since a year ago, was to position himself as a deal maker, right.

He's always had two images of himself. He's both the militarist and a deal maker.

And the militarist is sort of the guy who's more aggressive than anyone else, willing to do more extreme things than anyone else. The deal maker is the art of the deal and these are just images of himself in his own mind and they are not always compatible, right.

And so, I think he pivoted away from the militarism last September with a view to try to cut these deals. There's a been a number of times where he's veered off track like with the Soleimani killing and the virus obviously, the pandemic. But I think he's sort of back to that now but he's trying to head off the past perception that he's a war monger so he's trying to emphasize these deals, right. And so, I think that's his main stake at the moment.

DEWS: Well, I want to ask you the same kind of question about Joe Biden and his foreign policy successes. But obviously, he was the Vice President under Obama for eight years. And as I think about that question, it occurs to me that the answer might be more bound up in the pieces that you've written recently that are looking ahead to what a President Biden foreign policy might look like.

Because I think a lot of the analyses that you've put into these pieces, it does refer back to Obama's foreign policy, almost inevitably. So, I'd like to kind of switch gears now away from issues in the election and think about the implications of the election for U.S. foreign policy if Joe Biden becomes president or if Donald Trump wins a second term. So, kind of in that context, could we start with what a Biden administration foreign policy might look like?

WRIGHT: So, the first point is that Joe Biden in the election has been correctly able to draw dramatic contrast with Trump by just stating things that previously would have been fairly

generic and obvious, right. So, for Biden to say I'm in favor of America's alliances and I support NATO, normally that will be the sort of typical thing someone would say but it wouldn't tell you very much because everyone sort of says it, right.

Now, if anyone's in opposition they say the president hasn't done enough with allies, we need to do more with allies. But usually then they have to go further, right, because both candidates are sort of saying that. On this occasion, Trump is not saying that, he's saying the opposite. And so, actually it is legitimate for Biden to say I'm in favor of reliance's and that's a significant contrast. The issue though is that it doesn't tell you a huge amount about what it would be like in office, right, because that's a big wide sort of statement that covers a lot of different things and there's a lot of variance within it.

So, I think what's been happening is in sort of two debates occurring in parallel, there's the Trump Biden discussion, not just the debate but the broader discussion and division. And then there's the discussion amongst Democrats about what they would do if they went back in. And the second one is generally occurred in public view has been sort of neglected.

And I think what will happen is if Biden wins, decisively he's in after the election, attention will turn to that question and it won't just be how's Biden different to Trump it will be how is Biden different to Obama, if at all. Will there be a big difference? Is this Obama term three or is it something fundamentally different?

And, you know, I've written about in some of those pieces that there is, I think, an internal debate which one can track because much of it is published on a variety of things where you have sort of two broad camps. One, restorationist that will go back to the Obama world view, update it for events, of course, and taking into account the pandemic, of course, and changes in China but broadly speaking a same world view. And then those who might want to

break with that world view in some significant ways.

We don't know, I think, how that will net out because I would say that Vice President Biden's world view is broadly compatible with either approach. And so, I suspect it will be arbitrated during the presidency and that we'll see that be it fault line or dividing line a little bit in the presidency. So, I think he'll be pro-alliances, he'll want to get back into multilateralism, all of that. But the big question is what version of that will we see?

DEWS: I'd like to drill a little bit more into what you call the intra-democratic debate on foreign policy. And you write about this one case that you talk about extensively is policy towards China. So, can you kind of unpack what the two views in the Democratic party, in the Democratic establishment would look like with regard to policy in a Biden administration toward China.

WRIGHT: Yeah, you know, I think Obama pushed back against China but he was also wary of having his policy defined by geopolitical competition. And he wanted to have a healthy bilateral relationship with cooperation and shared issues early on. They did believe in this sort of convergence theory that as China integrated more into the global economy it will become more of a responsible stakeholder internationally and that it wasn't sort of revisionist. It began to (inaudible) I think over the course of the administration. But at the end of the administration, competition with China wasn't sort of a central organized in principle.

There was an expectation, there were people who descended from that within the administration. There was an expectation when Hilary Clinton was looking like she would win, that Clinton would shift in a more geo-political great power direction. That she would be more competitive toward China. She didn't win, of course, Trump won. His team made to great power competition the center of his administration although he never really bought into it himself but

it's in the official documents.

And now the question is if Biden were to win, does he sort of continue with a much more competitive approach to China, more competitive than Obama. Or does he sort of go back to this more balanced approach to say well let's stand up for our interests but we'll also try to forge cooperation of these transnational challenges and that the expectations of that will be pretty high.

I think it's highly likely that they will be more competitive. That they'll be tougher or more hard lined than Obama. Both because I think that's where the world is headed and there's also pressure from Congress and there's many people in the Biden world who believe that as well. But I think it's a bit of an open question. We don't know exactly where that will come out. And I think it depends in part on who is in these key positions as well. But I would just point out that there's a number of pieces written by former Obama administration officials, including one piece by Kurt Campbell who was the Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs and Ely Ratner who was Joe Biden's Deputy National Security Advisor.

Basically, arguing that successive presidents had gotten China wrong because of the core assumptions about liberalization and responsible stakeholderism. And that there needed to be a much more tough minded approach to China that sort of acknowledged that they wouldn't converge with the U.S. and other democracies internationally. So, I think we'll see that debate probably play out in the early days and first year of the administration.

DEWS: Another major foreign policy issue that I know is top of mind for many American's because we've been living with it for long that you discuss in the article is the Middle East. So, just as another example of how a Biden administration exemplified that discussion, that tension between two different viewpoints and how to deal with a major foreign policy issue. What would say on the Middle East question?

WRIGHT: This is one area where I think our colleagues and former colleagues have been particularly vocal. So, Mark Harlan and Tamara Wittes wrote a pretty influential piece on foreign affairs. Our former colleague Martin Indyk wrote a piece for the *Wall Street Journal* headlined, Middle East Just Isn't Worth It Anymore.

There have, I think, among centrists been a rethinking of the Middle East and I would say it's sort of like the pivot for real. We really have to pivot this time, that it's not as important to see other regions the U.S. already invested. So, that's been sort of striking, I think, the extent to which that debate has taken hold.

I think sometimes it's slightly mischaracterized as military intervention and will the U.S. intervene in Syria or Iraq. That's an element of it but I actually think any president would probably maintain the capability to do that because of the terrorism problem. Obviously, they don't want to see ISIS reemerge.

The real thing to watch, I think, is the relationship with the key of our allies. I mean, if there is a significant rethinking of that with Saudi Arabia, maybe the UAE, with Egypt and I think that could happen. Like if Joe Biden has been a critic of Saudi Arabia for some time now, there's still, I think, a lot of anger over the murder of Jamal Khashoggi feeling that NBS got away or have much sanction from that.

So, I think that that sort of debate will play out again in sort of the first year and it will really come down to is the U.S. trying to reassure the Gulf Arab allies that it's going to play its traditional role and has their back and generally favors their view of competition with Iran. Or will there be a much sort of higher bar threshold for involvement and pressure on them as well as on Iran to come to some sort of agreement for new equilibrium in the region.

DEWS: So, last question on a theoretical Biden administration foreign policy. And that is

about what certainties do you see in any Biden administration foreign policy, especially as compared to what you see possible with a Trump administration foreign policy. For example, I would assume that a Biden administration would put high value on continuing strong relationships with our transatlantic allies like Germany, Britain, NATO for example. A pretty forthright posture toward Russian expansionism and other kinds of issues like that.

WRIGHT: On that, I think the Biden team will, I wouldn't say try to be boring because that's the wrong way to put it. But I think they won't try to defy expectations, right. So, if you look at the VP choice, Kamala Harris was the front runner at the beginning and she ended up getting it. There was a process that created a little bit of commentary but they sort of did what you expected them to do, right.

And I think that foreign policy will be sort of the same. Like we won't be watching press conferences at NATO headquarters saying what will the president say, like will he endorse Article V or really not endorse Article V and does that mean that NATO will be at an end. You'll have a much more levelheaded approach, I think, that there's not a lot of surprises.

I do think that one thing that will be interesting to watch is this larger strategic debate about how exactly they define that's what they want to do. I expect that will be fairly well telegraphed and formalized in terms of the process.

But I think for the most part, it will be and it will seem much more conventional in the sense that it won't be many surprises coming from the U.S. side. They will be trying to sort of reassert some of those sort of core principles but then, of course, there's a lot of room for variance than in implementation and also in interpretation of that.

DEWS: Well, let's now pivot to what foreign policy might look like in a second Trump administration. Now I'm going to quote here from your recent piece in *The Atlantic*. Which is

titled, What a Second Trump Term Would Mean for the World. And you write, and I'll quote, "if Donald Trump defies the odds and wins a second term, the next four years will likely be more disruptive to U.S. foreign policy and world affairs than the past four have been. If he wins again, friend and foe alike will accept that the post-World War II period of American leadership has come to a definitive end."

WRIGHT: I don't mean to frighten people too much but I think with the first term because he was not particularly prepared and because he didn't really have that many people who believed what he believed and people didn't even really know that he believed what he believed even though I think it was pretty obvious if you looked that there was some duty there.

That for much of the first term, he was sort of fighting with people who had a more of a mainstream view, right. So, for the first year and a half or two years almost, he fought with Jim Mattis about what the Pentagon would do. And he kept ordering things and Mattis kept not doing them and slow rolling and interpreting in different ways.

And then he went through another Secretary of Defense and then he ended up with Mark Esper who he's got mixed relations with but who is generally more compliant with Trump, right, than Mattis had been. If there's a second term, Esper is definitely gone. I think you start off with the person who'd do whatever Trump wants and that will be the same across the board.

So, there won't be any real internal resistance anymore. You know, and Trump will view this as a massive personal vindication. It will become even more hyper personalized than it is now and will go from there, right. So basically, we won't be going through the time consuming process in the first term of these basic debates about whether or not to do what Trump wants or to have the traditional approach. It will just start right out on Trump.

So, that's the first point. I think he will be surrounded by loyalists from the beginning.

They'd also have a better idea of what they want to do because they do have experience from the first term so they sort of know the way things work now. They know what they want to try to do. So, I think he will also probably fall back on the only thing he has to fall back on which are his visceral instincts about the world, right.

So, he doesn't like allies, doesn't really like free trade deals. He likes authoritarian leaders and so he'll fall back on that. So, I think those elements will be become more acute, more pronounced. And then in terms of the rest of the world, most of the rest of the world has for the last four years been waiting to see if this is permanent or temporary. And they think it might be permanent, actually, they've always thought it's probably permanent but they don't know for sure.

And in recent months, obviously they think it might be more temporary because Biden has done so well and Trump has done so badly in the polls. But if Trump wins again, I think then you'll see an acceptance that the U.S. is basically out of the game, things are fundamentally altered and they will make decisions to adjust to that.

So, adversaries may become more assertive, particularly Russia, but also allies like Turkey who have been quite problematic early on could take advantage. And the allies, I think, will lose confidence in the alliance. Now it won't all collapse immediately but I think thing will begin to happen that have not happened to date.

And in a way it's a little bit like, I like to use the pandemic analogy. In the first term, the immune system of the international order has been sort of stripped away and in the second term, there is no immune system. So, whatever happens now, I think, will tilt world politics in one direction or another. The confrontation over (inaudible) is a good example, the U.S. is basically absent. So, that will just take whatever course it's going to take.

DEWS: That's the fight between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

WRIGHT: Yeah. You know, and we'll see that in a variety of other areas too, I think, where world events now will occur without great American engagement if Trump is reelected.

DEWS: So, you mentioned that western allies might do things that have never been done before in a second Trump term. What kinds of things would allies like Germany and France and Italy or even Canada? Will they seek their own relations with some of America's adversaries like China and Russia or will they seek other kinds of trade deals or other kinds of relationships that they haven't sought before?

WRIGHT: I think Europe is an interesting example. I mean, I think they'll wait to see in part if Trump does actually try to pull back from NATO in a significant way. The French would definitely like to see more European movements on the common defense policy and European sovereignty as they call it. There's some resistance to that inside Europe and also, I think there's a question about European capacity do to that but they would like to see that happen.

But I think psychologically, the recognition will be there that they don't have the U.S. anymore. You know, that the U.S. will not only not lead a multilateralism and transnational threats, it may be a primary obstacle to European interests on it. You know, like if maybe an opponent on climate progress or on a cooperative response to the pandemic or on attaining an open global economy.

So, I think they may be tempted to retreat behind European borders to try to have some safety, be a bit more protectionists themselves. Eastern Europe, I think, will want to have their own relationship with Trump because many of those countries like Poland and Hungary get on pretty well with the Trump administration. So, they may try to almost decouple a little bit from the European Union on attaining membership of it and have their own sort of bilateral relationship with the U.S.

So, I think there's lots of things that will occur on a week to week, month to month basis will seem incremental. But on the whole, I could get into pretty dramatic shifts and then of course if there's a crisis, then all of that is dramatically accelerated. So, I would worry a lot about second term.

And I guess the analogy I will just finish on here is if you look at immigration policy, Trump started out by saying I'm only against illegal immigration, I just want to fix elements of it. By the end of the administration, they're trying to end legal immigration as well as illegal immigration basically completely as far as I can tell from very radicalized.

Something similar is possible on NATO, possible on trade, on authoritarianism. You just will potentially see this radicalization during the term.

DEWS: I wanted to ask as we wrap up here, what you think no matter who wins, some of the biggest foreign policy challenges in the next few months are going to be. But it kind of feels like we are in a wait and see period. I'm going to quote Gandalf from Lord of the Rings where he says that we're in the deep breath before the plunge. And we just don't know and so much depends on who wins the election, who is inaugurated president in January.

WRIGHT: I think it's a very uncertain period. I think there's one thing we know for sure, right. So, we know that the pandemic will continue for a while and that it will be a defining challenge for the U.S. and for the world. Probably until next summer, hopefully if there's a vaccine. So, that I think is the overwhelming international challenge.

And I think it is fair to say that if Trump is reelected, we won't see a major change in how the U.S. is handling. You know, he'll probably fire Fauci pretty early on. He'll just basically try to muddle on through until there's a vaccine. He'll be highly nationalistic about the vaccine if it's American and there will be very little international cooperation.

There will be really no effort with like-minded countries to repair the international architecture and infrastructure, particularly in public health and global public health. And on the economy, he'll have basically zero interest in trying to reopen the world economy in way that is cooperative and returns to this openness and getting rid of some of the protectionist measures. They may even go in the opposite direction.

So, in the Trump piece you mentioned, I talk about the late 1940s which we all look at as like the late 1940s in foreign policy, U.S. foreign policy are like the founding fathers in the American constitutional development, right. It's where it all started. And in the late 1940s, Harry Truman was president, he was relatively unknown, had been vice president just for a few months but he turned out to be one of America's greatest presidents.

While the vice president who preceded Truman was Henry Wallace who had been hardenly sort of pro-Soviet, against containment, didn't really like Europe very much, didn't want the U.S. to be engaged. One of the great counterfactuals to history is if Wallace had been president, right, if FDR hadn't dumped him from the ticket just months before he died, before FDR died then what would have happened?

I think we're in a similar sort of moment here, right. So, this post-pandemic period is going to be crucial and the question is do we have a traditionalist who will try to assert sort of U.S. leadership and play that traditional role as Biden. Or do we have our Wallace, right, who basically was the opposite. And, you know, I think if he does the opposite, I think that will have repercussions, not just for the four years but really well beyond that. Because I think that at point, things just begin to take on a life of their own and there's really very little of putting the genie back in the bottle.

DEWS: Well, I love ending this conversation on a historical note as we simultaneously

look ahead to the next month. As always, Tom Wright, thank you for sharing with us your time and your expertise on these very important matters.

WRIGHT: Fred, thanks so much. I look forward to talking with you again. Thanks.

DEWS: The Brookings Cafeteria podcast is made possible only with the help of an amazing team of colleagues. My thanks to audio engineer Gaston Reboredo, Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press who does the book interviews. Marie Wilkin, Adrianna Pita and Chris McKenna for their collaboration, and Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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