

[What Explains Donald Trump's Foreign Policy?](#)

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Stephen Zunes, a professor of politics and international studies at the University of San Francisco.

Ever since his inauguration in 2017, US President Donald Trump has placed an emphasis on unilateralism and the rejection of international organizations and treaties as the hallmarks of his foreign policy.

Trump has assumed an aggressive modus operandi in dealing with US partners worldwide and alienated many allies. He [repealed](#) US participation in the UN Human Rights Council, UNESCO, the 2015 Paris Climate Accord, the Treaty on Open Skies, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Even in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, he pulled the US out of the World Health Organization.

The president has pledged to draw an end to the “[forever wars](#)” the United States has been involved in over the past couple of decades, and he has challenged the view that America should be the world’s “[policeman](#).” At the same time, his Middle East policy has been nothing short of hawkish, and he has [dragged](#) the United States to the brink of war with Iran.

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Some observers explain Trump’s overseas agenda by noting that he has been hellbent on scoring political points by hurling out of the window the foreign policy legacy of his predecessor, Barack Obama. Others say he has been focused on pulling off his “America First” [policy](#), premised on putting US commitments and global leadership on the backburner and emphasizing the empowerment of the national economy.

Stephen Zunes is a professor of politics and international studies at the University of San Francisco. A leading scholar of the US affairs in the Middle East, he is a senior policy analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus and an associate editor of the Peace Review journal. His latest book is “Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresoluble.”

In this edition of [The Interview](#), Fair Observer talks to Zunes about Trump’s foreign policy challenges, his relationship with autocrats and his strategy in the Middle East.

The transcript has been edited for clarity. This interview took place in summer 2020.

Kouros Ziabari: In a recent article on Foreign Policy, the former undersecretary of state for political affairs, Wendy Sherman, claimed that President Trump — after three and a half years in office — has “developed no foreign policy at all” and that his approach to foreign affairs has been one “without objectives, without strategy, [and] without any indication that it protects and advances US interests.” Is Trump’s foreign policy as disastrous as Sherman describes, or is she saying so merely as a former Obama administration official with partisan interests?

Stephen Zunes: This is a reasonably accurate statement. Indeed, many Republicans feel the same way, believing Trump has wasted an opportunity to further a more active foreign policy advancing their more hegemonic and militaristic agenda by failing to fill a number of important State Department positions and failing to articulate a clear policy.

By all accounts, Trump is profoundly ignorant of even the most basic facts relevant to foreign policy — the names and locations of foreign countries, modern diplomatic history and other things which most reasonably well-educated Americans know. His refusal to even read policy briefs his advisers have written up for him has made it impossible for him to develop any kind of coherent foreign policy agenda. His view toward foreign relations is largely transactional — what you can do for me will determine US policy toward your country — and therefore not based on any overall vision of advancing US interests, much less international peace and security.

His efforts to push foreign governments to pursue policies designed to help his reelection led to his impeachment earlier this year, but the Republican-controlled Senate refused to convict him despite overwhelming evidence of illegal activities in this regard.

Ziabari: Some of the major foreign policy challenges of the Trump administration emanated from the threats apparently posed to the United States by Iran, North Korea, China and Russia. How has Trump dealt with these challenges? A June 2020 poll by Gallup found that only 41% of US adults approve of Trump's performance in foreign policy. Is there a yardstick by which we can measure the president's success in his overseas agenda?

Zunes: Virtually every administration, regardless of party, has tended to exaggerate overseas threats to varying degrees, and this is certainly true with Trump. There have been real inconsistencies, however. For example, he has been far more tolerant toward North Korea, which has violated previous agreements and pursued its nuclear weapons program, than he has been toward Iran, which had dramatically reduced its nuclear capabilities and was scrupulously honoring its nuclear agreement prior to the US withdrawal from the Iran [nuclear] deal. Similarly, he has tolerated a series of provocative actions by Russia while obsessively targeting China.

While hypocrisy and double standards is certainly not a new phenomenon in US foreign policy, Trump's actions have taken this to a new extreme and have severely weakened US credibility in the international community.

Ziabari: How has foreign policy historically influenced the prospects of politicians winning elections in the United States? Do you expect President Trump's divisive foreign policy decisions to derail his chances of being reelected in November?

Zunes: Foreign policy is even less of a factor in this year's election than usual, so it is unlikely to determine the outcome. Ironically, as in 2016, Trump may run to the left of the Democratic nominee, so, despite Trump's impetuous and problematic foreign policy leadership, foreign policy issues may actually weigh to his advantage.

During the 2016 campaign, Trump successfully, if somewhat disingenuously, was able to portray himself as a president who would be more cautious than his Democratic opponent regarding unpopular US military interventions overseas. Despite having actually supported the invasion of Iraq, Trump was largely successful in depicting himself as a war opponent and Hillary Clinton as a reckless militarist who might get the United States in another round of endless wars in the Middle East. An [analysis](#) of voting data demonstrated that a significant number of voters in northern swing states who supported the anti-Iraq War Barack Obama in the 2008 and 2012 elections switched to supporting Trump in the 2016 election over this very issue, thereby making possible his Electoral College majority.

Already, the Trump campaign has begun targeting Joe Biden on this very issue. Biden played a critical role as head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in pushing the war authorization through the Democratic-controlled Senate, limiting hearings and stacking the witness list with war opponents. He has also repeatedly lied about his support for the [Iraq] war — even after inspectors had returned and confirmed the absence of the weapons of mass destruction that he and President Bush falsely claimed Iraq still possessed — giving the Trump campaign an opening to press this issue even more.

Meanwhile, Biden has alienated many rank-and-file Democrats by pushing through a party platform calling for tens of billions of dollars of unconditional taxpayer-funded arms transfers to Israel while not even mentioning, much less condemning, the Israeli occupation and settlements. It criticizes efforts by both the United Nations and civil society campaigns to end the occupation as somehow unfairly delegitimizing Israel itself. This comes despite [polls](#) showing a sizable majority of Democrats oppose the occupation and settlements and support conditioning aid.

Neither candidate appears willing to reduce the United States' bloated military budget or end arms transfers to dictatorships. However, Biden has promised to end support for Saudi Arabia's devastating war on Yemen and the longstanding US backing of the Saudi regime, as well as reverse Trump's escalation of the nuclear arms race, both of which are popular positions.

Meanwhile, Biden has won over the vast majority of the foreign policy establishment, including quite a few Republicans, who have been appalled by Trump's treatment of traditional allies and cozy relations with the Russian regime. How much impact this will have on swing voters, however, remains to be seen.

Ziabari: Trump's pullout from the Iran nuclear deal was one of his major and contentious foreign policy decisions. In a poll conducted shortly after he announced the US withdrawal, CNN found 63% of Americans believed the United States should stick with the accord, while only 29% favored abandoning it. Last year, a Pew Research Center poll revealed 56% of the respondents did not have faith in the president's ability to handle the crisis with Iran. Has the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign against the Islamic Republic yielded the results it was expected to achieve?

Zunes: Iran already made enormous compromises in agreeing to the JCPOA required it to destroy billions of dollars' worth of nuclear facilities and material while neither the United States nor any of Iran's nuclear-armed neighbors — namely Israel, India and Pakistan — were required to reduce their arsenals or any other aspects of their nuclear program. Iran agreed to these unilateral concessions in return for a lifting of the debilitating sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council.

Despite full Iranian compliance with the agreement, the United States not only re-imposed its own sanctions, but it effectively forced foreign governments and countries to do the same at an enormous cost to the Iranian people. Hardline elements in the Iranian government, who opposed the agreement on the grounds that the United States could not be trusted to uphold its end of the deal, feel they have been vindicated, and moderate elements in the government are on the defensive.

Some fear that the goal of the Trump administration in tearing up the agreement was to encourage the Iranians to resume their nuclear program, which is exactly what happened, in order to provoke a crisis that could give the United States an excuse to go to war.

The mistake the United States made in Vietnam was seeing the leftist revolution against the US-backed regime in Saigon in terms of its communist leadership rather than the strong nationalist sentiments which propelled it. Washington could not understand why the more troops we sent and the more bombs we dropped actually strengthened the opposition.

Similarly, looking at the Iranian regime in terms of its Islamist leadership misses the strong nationalist sentiments in that country. While a growing number of Iranians oppose the authoritarianism, conservatism and corruption of the clerical and military leadership, a large majority appear to support the regime in its confrontation with the United States. Iranians, like the Vietnamese, are among the most nationalistic people in the world. Iran, formerly known as Persia, has been a regional power on and off for the past 2,500 years and does not appreciate being treated in such a dismissive way. The more pressure on Iran, the greater the resistance.

Concerns raised by the Trump administration about the Iranian regime — its repression, discrimination against women and religious minorities, support for extremist groups, interference in other countries, among other points — are indeed valid. Yet each of these issues are also true, in fact, even more so, when it comes to Saudi Arabia and other close US allies in the region. The problem the United States has with Iran, therefore, is not in regard to such negative behavior, but the fact that Iran is the most powerful country in the greater Middle East that rejects US hegemony. Iran was willing to compromise on its nuclear program, but it is not going to compromise when it comes to its sovereignty.

Ziabari: One of the critical points President Trump's opponents raise about him is his affinity for autocratic leaders and dictators. He has — on different occasions — praised, congratulated or invited to the White House President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines; President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt; President Vladimir Putin of Russia; the far-right leader of the French party National Rally, Marine Le Pen; and the supreme leader of North Korea, Kim Jong Un. Why is Trump attracted to these unpopular leaders? Can it be attributed to his desire for becoming a president for life?

Zunes: Most US presidents have supported allied dictatorships. Under both Republican and Democratic administrations, US arms have flowed to autocratic regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other repressive Arab regimes as well as dictators in Africa, Asia and, in previous years, Latin America as well.

What makes Trump different is that while previous administrations at least pretended to support improved human rights in these countries, and often rationalized for arms transfers and other close relations as a means of supposedly influencing them in that direction, Trump doesn't even pretend to support political freedom and has even praised their repressive tactics.

There is little question that Trump himself has autocratic tendencies. The US Constitution prevents him from becoming president for life and other more overt autocratic measures, but he has certainly stretched his presidential authority in a number of very disturbing ways.

Ziabari: Rescinding international agreements, reducing the commitments of the US government abroad and embracing unilateralism have been the epitome of Trump's foreign policy. This is believed to have created rifts between the US and its traditional allies, particularly in the European Union and NATO. Some observers of US foreign policy, however, say the gulf has been exaggerated and that the United States continues to enjoy robust relations with its global partners. What are your thoughts?

Zunes: Due to the United States' economic and military power, most foreign governments have little choice but to work closely with Washington on any number of issues. However, the United States is no longer looked at for leadership in ways it had been previously. This decline has been going on for some time, accelerating during the George W. Bush administration and paused during the Obama administration, but it has now plummeted under Trump to a degree that it is not likely to recover. The rejection of basic diplomatic protocols and other traditions of international relations repeatedly exhibited by Trump has alienated even some of the United States' more conservative allies.

While Joe Biden is certainly far more knowledgeable, experienced and diplomatic in his approach to foreign policy than the incumbent president, his support for the Iraq invasion, the Israeli occupation and various allied dictatorships has also made him suspect in the eyes of many erstwhile allies. And many allies have already reset their foreign policy priorities to make them less dependent on and less concerned about the United States and its priorities.

Ziabari: President Trump appears to have taken US-Israel relations to a new level, making himself known as the most pro-Israel US president after Harry Truman, as suggested by several commentators and pundits, such as the renowned political analyst Bill Schneider. Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, defunded UNRWA, closed down the Palestine Liberation Organization's office in Washington and unveiled the "deal of the century," a much-hyped peace plan for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that Palestinian factions rejected outright on account of being overly biased in favor of Israel. Why has Trump prioritized pleasing the Israelis and advancing their territorial ambitions?

Zunes: The right-wing coalition governing Israel shares Trump's anti-Arab racism, Islamophobia and contempt for human rights and international law, so this is not surprising. While Democratic administrations rationalized their support for Israel on the grounds that it was a liberal democracy — at least for its Jewish citizens — what draws Trump to Israel is the right-wing, anti-democratic orientation of its current government.

Though Trump has brought US support for Israeli violations of international legal norms to unprecedented levels, in practice — at least for Palestinians living under occupation — it has made little difference. For example, previous administrations did not overtly recognize Israeli settlements and annexation as Trump has, saying such issues should be resolved in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. However, this policy ignored the gross power asymmetry between the Palestinians under occupation and the Israeli occupiers, an imbalance compounded by the fact that as the chief mediator in negotiations, the US has also served as the primary military, economic and diplomatic supporter of the occupying power.

By refusing to condition the billions of dollars' worth of unconditional military aid to Israel on Israeli adherence to international law and human rights norms and blocking the United Nations Security Council from enforcing — or, in some cases, even passing — resolutions calling for Israeli compliance with its international legal obligations, it gave Israel's right-wing government no incentive to make the necessary compromises for peace. In many respects, Trump's policies have simply codified what was already going on under previous administrations.

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