

Trump, The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Squandering of America's "Soft Power Advantage"

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Donald Trump's election as US president was greeted by predictable cries of outrage- many with good reason and quite genuine. The elite, especially the foreign policy elite, were upset as well but for different reasons.

Large segments of the foreign policy establishment, centred perhaps on the neocons but extending way beyond them, and of course the military-industrial complex, had fears - unwarranted but anguishing - that peace with Russia would break out. Some were concerned that Trump would blunder into a war with China.

Generally there was a consensus that Trump was not a fit person to run the empire, and for all of his talk of 'making America great again,' he would hasten its decline. His stance towards the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) provides a valuable case study, because it goes to the heart of imperial strategy under the surface brouhaha, where reality often lurks.

Instruments of Power - Hard and Soft

All nations, big and small, have a range of instruments with which they can attempt to advance their foreign policy objectives, whether that means defending themselves, acquiring resources, dominating others or just getting on with the neighbours in a reasonably amicable way, importing and exporting, going on overseas holidays, receiving inbound tourists and all the rest of it. These instruments stretch from the easily defined hard-military-power to the more elusive forms of soft power. The term 'soft power' is identified with Joseph Nye Jr., who defined it in a limited and self-congratulatory way. His concept is succinctly described by [John Ikenberry](#) thus:

Coined by Nye in the late 1980s, the term "soft power" — the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion — is now widely invoked in foreign policy debates... Nye argues that successful states need both hard and soft power — the ability to coerce others as well as the ability to shape their long-term attitudes and preferences. The United States can dominate others, but it has also excelled in projecting soft power, with the help of its companies, foundations, universities, churches, and other institutions of civil society; U.S. culture, ideals, and values have been extraordinarily important in helping Washington attract partners and supporters. Nye acknowledges the limits of soft power: it tends to have diffuse effects on the outside world and is not easily wielded to achieve specific outcomes. Indeed, societies often embrace American values and culture but resist U.S. foreign policies. But overall, Nye's message is that U.S. security hinges as much on winning hearts and minds as it does on winning wars.



Soft power has many facets, usually interrelated. The United States has unrivalled influence over the global media and intellectual space. Even in Russia and China, except when national interests are directly concerned, the US position is the default one. In the other direction, it encompasses the use of money to bribe and corrupt, as exemplified by the injunction of David Petraeus to use money as ammunition. This found so much favour with the US military at the time that it was institutionalised into a training programme. And it may have contributed to the rise of ISIS, although the concept had long historical antecedents. This 'bribery' may not, in fact, involve money but prestige and may be regarded as anything but improper by either the payer or the recipient. For instance (former) New Zealand Prime Minister John Key was very excited to play golf with (former) US President Barack Obama—so much so that New Zealand's troops were sent to serve in Afghanistan. Not many were killed.

It is clear that the US has more of virtually all of these instruments than any other country in the world. There are exceptions. Saudi Arabia, for instance, has disbursed huge amounts of money throughout the Islamic world to extend its influence and promote Wahhabism. This has ranged from building mosques in Indonesia to funding insurgents in Syria. Much of the ground fighting in Libya in 2011 was funded by Qatar.

Saudi Arabia's use of its vast wealth (through its government and privately) to promote religious (and political) influence is analogous to America's Fulbright Program or the Soviet Union's [Communist University of the Toilers of the East](#) (which included amongst its alumni Ho Chi Minh, Deng Xiaoping and Chiang Ching-kuo, who succeeded his father Chiang Kai-shek as president of the Republic of China on Taiwan). But money alone does not buy lasting influence, there must be something in the disburser's ideas that the recipients find attractive.

The liberal international order and the US alliance system

We now have in many parts of the world three generations of elites who have grown up in an American-dominated world. This domination takes many forms. Culture, especially in the form of Hollywood, and the use of English both as a lingua franca and a marker of prestige at being a member of the globalised elite. Subordination is now internalised. Perhaps the core of this domination is diplomatic power. This can be expressed in traditional ways; for instance the UNSC resolutions condemning Iran and North Korea for testing missiles—activities which are quite legitimate for other countries but have been delegitimised for them because of American pressure.

Diplomatic power has also increasingly been used for economic ends—to create economic institutions such as the WTO and ideas such as the Washington Consensus, as well as a global economic architecture that privileges the United States. Other countries may also benefit from this architecture, though there are many especially in Africa and Latin America which have not. An alliance must offer benefits for subordinates, or at least segments of the elite in those subordinate countries. Even the most rapacious of empires must do this. The Belgian Congo, for instance, was notorious for enriching Belgium (or rather mainly its king) and impoverishing the Congo, but there must have been a fair number of Congolese, who found serving the Belgians economically satisfying and spiritually valuable as it brought them Christianity. In other words the Belgian empire, along with the other European and non-European empires, can be thought of as an alliance system. These systems vary in

overtness and symbolism, as well as degree of rapaciousness, but they are all hierarchal.

The US alliance system is the most successful in history. Streets in defeated countries are seldom named after American presidents, nor do statues extolling American power embellish foreign cities in the style, for instance, of the British Empire, but American dominance is stronger for that modesty and restraint. American writers tend to exaggerate the autonomy of local governments – the imposition of [THAAD on South Korea](#) being one example – and local elites, for their part, pretend that they are equal partners.

Headlines announcing the decision on the THAAD deployment frequently put South Korea first before the US: “[South Korea and US officially announce deployment of THAAD missile defense system](#).” This is camouflage obscuring the underlying power relationship. The United States is deploying the THAAD system in South Korea despite the fact that it offers no substantial added protection against North Korea and jeopardizes South Korea’s economic relationship with China as well as make South Korea a target in the event of a Sino-American war, because the deployment is advantageous to the US in its containment of China. Alliances are not a one-way street, but they exist and operate primarily for the dominant power.

Its alliance system is a huge source of strength for the US. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, the bible of the establishment, in 2016, Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth addressed the question of whether rising China would challenge US hegemony, and answered no in – ‘[The Once and Future Superpower: Why China Won’t Overtake the United States](#).’

Even though the United States’ economic dominance has eroded from its peak, the country’s military superiority is not going anywhere, nor is the globe-spanning alliance structure that constitutes the core of the existing liberal international order (unless Washington unwisely decides to throw it away). Rather than expecting a power transition in international politics, everyone should start getting used to a world in which the United States remains the sole superpower for decades to come. [emphasis added]

When they wrote that article, Trump was a presidential candidate, but his chances were seen as slim; they mention the danger of ‘unwisely throwing away’ America’s major geopolitical advantage in passing rather than a threatening possibility.

Alliances provide extra firepower for the US military although since no alliance member comes anywhere close to the US in terms of military expenditure the increment so far has not been particularly significant. The second ranking member of the alliance, the UK, has a [military budget](#) less than nine percent of America’s. In fact, the entire British military budget (\$52.5 billion) is slightly less than the \$54 billion that Trump [plans to add](#) to America’s! The alliance also provides a very large market for the US military-industrial complex, [\\$40 billion in 2015](#), the last year for which figures are available.

[John G. Ikenberry](#) notes with satisfaction the military advantage its alliance system gives the US over its near-peer competitors Russia and China, which do not have anything comparable:

Indeed, Washington enjoys a unique ability to win friends and influence states. According to a study led by the political scientist Brett Ashley Leeds, the United States boasts military partnerships with more than 60 countries, whereas

Russia counts eight formal allies and China has just one (North Korea). As one British diplomat told me several years ago, “China doesn’t seem to do alliances.” But the United States does, and they pay a double dividend: not only do alliances provide a global platform for the projection of U.S. power, but they also distribute the burden of providing security. The military capabilities aggregated in this U.S.-led alliance system outweigh anything China or Russia might generate for decades to come.

The US alliance system is a product of history, and Ikenberry’s complacency about its permanency and the inability of its competitors to build alliances may be misplaced. The possible defection of the [Philippines](#) and the creation of groups such as the [Shanghai Security Organization](#) (SCO) may be harbingers of realignments in the future. And then there is President Trump, whose lack of skill in alliance management is evident, not least to the [Australians](#).

It is on the soft side that the alliance system is truly valuable. Constructing ‘Coalitions of the Willing’ gives an air of legitimacy to the most egregious violations of international law, such as the invasion of Iraq. But this power is not confined to overt and dramatic actions. It seeps into the very fabric of what is called ‘the liberal international order.’

Ikenberry (in the same article) touches on this:

Indeed, the construction of a U.S.-led global order did not begin with the end of the Cold War; it won the Cold War. In the nearly 70 years since World War II, Washington has undertaken sustained efforts to build a far-flung system of multilateral institutions, alliances, trade agreements, and political partnerships. This project has helped draw countries into the United States’ orbit. It has helped strengthen global norms and rules that And it has given the United States the capacities, partnerships, and principles to confront today’s great-power spoilers and revisionists, such as they are [i.e. Russia and China]. Alliances, partnerships, multilateralism, democracy—these are the tools of U.S. leadership, and they are winning, not losing, the twenty-first-century struggles over geopolitics and the world order. [Emphasis added]

Again, Ikenberry’s confidence in its permanence may be misplaced, but he is correct, even overly modest, to note the pervasive impregnation of the global institutional and legal architecture by American power. US soft power is historically unparalleled.

However, it is axiomatic that the less soft power is employed to achieve a particular objective, the more hard power is needed. It is also axiomatic, following Sun Zi, who said that [the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting](#), that it is wiser in general to use soft tools than hard ones. This is particularly true for the United States, which although it has enormous hard power – spending nearly as much on its military as the rest of the world put together – its real comparative advantage lies in soft power. This is all the more so since its military power has, in fact, been remarkably unsuccessful since 1945 – so much so that Reagan invaded the small Caribbean island of Grenada (army 600) partly to exorcise the ‘[Vietnam Syndrome](#)’. As recent adventures in the Middle East have shown, that hasn’t worked.

Clearly Donald Trump doesn’t see things this way, and his penchant for militarisation, and [generals](#), has been frequently noted. The commentator [John Feffer](#) remarks, ‘But so far only America’s soft power has taken a hit. The Pentagon remains on the ascendant.’ Feffer

then makes the frequent liberal mistake of seeing the two as contrasting and mutually exclusive—the one being benign and the other to be deplored – ‘The world will continue to suffer the consequences of U.S. military force but without the mitigating influences of U.S. foreign aid and diplomacy.’ The point is missed that these are essentially both forms of power projection, and whilst mode is important – countless people have been killed, maimed or had their lives devastated by US military action – it is the objectives and consequences of power that should be the focus of analysis.

Trump and the TPP – abandoning jewels of empire

This brings us to Trump and the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). It should be clear that plans for the TPP were a constituent part of the US-dominated liberal economic order. TPP was designed by the Obama administration to preserve US economic and political dominance in the Pacific Basin and to counter the rise of China. [China was deliberately excluded](#) from the TPP.

The TPP was to build on US advantage. Politically it was to utilise the alliance system to corral China and bind members more closely to the US. Economically it was to build on America’s strengths, such as in intellectual property rights.

There was widespread opposition to the TPP. For instance in New Zealand, whose government was enthusiastic, there was a vigorous protest movement spearheaded by Auckland University law professor [Jane Kelsey](#). But in the government, none were more enthusiastic about the TPP than then-Minister for Trade Negotiations [Tim Groser](#) who came up with a striking metaphor for the compromises inherent in a negotiation:

“It’s got the smell of a situation we occasionally see which is that on the hardest core issues, there are some ugly compromises out there.

“And when we say ugly, we mean ugly from each perspective – it doesn’t mean ‘I’ve got to swallow a dead rat and you’re swallowing foie gras.’ It means both of us are swallowing dead rats on three or four issues to get this deal across the line.”

New Zealand is famous for its wine.

In one of those coincidences which can enliven high politics, and in this case illustrate the power of the US alliance system, Groser subsequently became New Zealand ambassador to the United States where he was on hand to celebrate the inauguration of Donald Trump by hosting a party at the New Zealand embassy. It was the first of many, and [The Washingtonian](#) took mischievous delight in describing the scene:

But Ambassador Tim Groser made no attempt to hide his elation about the evening’s guest list [which attracted a number of the Trump team].... .
“Getting access to Trump will be everybody’s ambition,” the ambassador said. He beamed at all of his new friends. “We have got off to a flying start.”

It didn’t matter that Groser had helped craft the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the trade agreement from which Trump today withdrew. It didn’t matter that Groser has spent much of his career promoting other trade policies antithetical to Trumpism. Disagreements be damned, what mattered now was access—something everyone scrambles for with each regime change in

Washington, but always demurely. Yet Groser was unabashed: he regaled the crowd with the story of how he first snagged Trump's cell phone number (he knew a guy who knew a guy), and professed his own thrill about the end of "PC" culture.

In fact Ambassador Groser's willingness to swallow dead rats was not matched by large parts of the US people, and the TPP was dead in the water before Trump became president; as the [New York Times](#) put it, 'The agreement had been put on life support by labor protests and liberal opposition.'

But Trump did deliver the *coup de grace*, proudly proclaiming in his speech to the [Joint Session of Congress](#) on 1 March 2017:

We have withdrawn the United States from the job-killing Trans-Pacific Partnership.

For the foreign policy establishment, the scrapping of the TPP is one example of Trump's ineptitude, but it is also a symbol of the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the Trump phenomenon. He won the 2017 election against the odds and against most of the elite media, because he, more than anyone and in contrast to Hillary Clinton, spoke to the alienation and distress of large swathes of the American people. Sanders, who also addressed these concerns, was scuttled by the Democratic Party establishment. However, although Trump fastened onto the pain, his diagnosis was superficial and his proposed cure merely a reflection of his narcissism. Promising to make America great again, he will instead exacerbate the problems and accelerate the decline. If it weren't such a serious business, with quite possibly calamitous consequences, the howls of anguish, anger and frustration of the American and international elite at his antics would be amusing.

And it goes beyond verbalising outrage; there has been talk of a coup for months and the 'Deep State' has entered the lexicon of the mainstream media where it had been studiously ignored in the past. There is hope that Trump can be impeached before too much harm is done, Pence – whoever he might be – installed in his place and the show returned to proper management. The only person who seems to see a silver lining is the irrepressible Charles Krauthammer, who thinks that a combination of Trump's madness and the realism of the generals and billionaires really running the show might just work in keeping foreign friend and foe in their place. Krauthammer's is a lonely voice, and the consensus is that Trump is not fit to run the empire.

'Not fit to run the empire' is used purposely. We should not be distracted by all the howls to overlook the fact that Trump is basically following in the footsteps of Obama, Bush and their predecessors back in essence to George Washington, Monroe and John Quincy Adams. This continuity was demonstrated by Michèle Flournoy's endorsement of Trump's proposal for a "huge" hike in military expenditure in his first budget speech. Flournoy, who might well have been Secretary of Defense in a Hillary Clinton administration, wrote an Op-ed in the *Washington Post* entitled '[Trump is right to spend more on defense. Here's how to do so wisely](#).' Nothing much for the military-industrial complex to get worried about there.

There are considerable differences in style and rhetoric between Trump and Obama, but the continuities are even greater and getting more substantial every passing day as Trump is constrained and tamed by the institutions of state. Indeed [Breitbart News](#) has reported with

horror that Andrew Quinn, a former deputy chief negotiator of the TPP, has been appointed Trump's new special assistant on international trade, investment and development. It is not impossible, after all, to anticipate Trump coming round to embracing the TPP-renamed and dressed in new garments of course. It is uncertain that Trump has any fixed beliefs or convictions at all, except for his sure knowledge that he is the centre of the universe.

And then there are the lies. Trump is famous for lies, and the mainstream media takes great delight in revealing and debunking them. But 95% of Trump's lies are Obama's lies – the generic lies of the American state: how America is threatened by small states such as Iran and North Korea; how the United States has a burning desire to spread democracy, freedom and peace throughout the world; how it is anxious to preserve freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, etc. Trump has his own separate lies, usually revolving around his own narcissistic personality, but his enemies are no slouches. The idea that the Russians won the election for Trump is a [whopper](#), and the bizarre accusation that there is some sort of [collusion](#) between the Trump team and Putin is an illustration of just how outraged the establishment is.

TPP, protectionism, renegotiation and decline

Outrage was just one of the emotions occasioned by Trump's killing off TPP. One of the others was bewilderment that one of their own – Trump is a billionaire after all – could do something so stupid. The [New York Times](#) report brought out how Trump was foolishly casting aside America's strengths, especially the alliance system and dominance of international institutions:

“There's no doubt that this action will be seen as a huge, huge win for China,” Michael B. Froman, the trade representative who negotiated the pact for Mr. Obama, said in an interview. “For the Trump administration, after all this talk about being tough on China, for their first action to basically hand the keys to China and say we're withdrawing from our leadership position in this region is geostrategically damaging.”.....

[TPP] was intended to lower tariffs while establishing rules for resolving trade disputes, setting patents and protecting intellectual property.

Obama officials argued that it benefited the United States by opening markets while giving up very little in return. In particular, it finally brought the United States and Japan, the world's largest and third-largest economies, together in a free-trade pact. [emphasis added]

So instead of utilising Japan and the members of the alliance to counter China's rise and preserve US dominance, as preferred by Froman and Obama, Trump is taking America into a bilateral face-off against Beijing.

The establishment of course had a problem, both of reality and communications. The US working class – ‘Middle America’ – had seen its [wages stagnate over decades](#) and [job opportunities](#) shrink. There were a number of reasons for this, which neither Democrats nor Republicans wanted to address, and China became a convenient whipping-boy. The TPP would not have tackled these problems, but it would have helped preserve US economic and political hegemony for the benefit of corporate America and the 1% (of which Trump is a paid-up member).

The [Washington Post](#) admitted the impact of imports on some industries and waved the familiar China-blame banner but again agonised over Trump's abandonment of America's strongest card:

Again, we don't dispute the impact — especially on the light industries such as shoes or furniture hardest hit by imports. Nor do we quarrel with the Trump agenda's assertion that trade with China has largely failed to induce greater abiding of the law and transparency by that one-party state. Yet the best way to counteract China's mercantilism would seem to be by precisely the sort of U.S.-led multilateral cooperation that the Trump administration has rejected, in the form of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The Trump agenda blames past policymakers for "turn[ing] a blind eye to unfair trade practices" in the pursuit of "putative geopolitical advantage." Geopolitics, though, is just another word for shaping the world to serve all U.S. interests, with a minimum of conflict. And the real blindness consists in unilaterally asserting "sovereignty" and "protection" without regard to the legitimate interests of other nations, or their capacity for retaliation. [emphasis added]

Trump is not the only American politician to overlook the fact that when you go to war, trade or otherwise, against another country, you face the danger of retaliation. In most cases the US gets away with this, because the chosen adversaries are so much smaller, but China clearly is [different](#).

Why does Trump take this strange course of action? He claims that he is not protectionist though he certainly played that card during the election, and protectionism, in appropriate circumstances and as part of a coherent policy, has a long and distinguished pedigree. Rather he claims that he is in favour of trade that is 'fair' and that previous administrations have been too weak and incompetent to get the best terms for America. He will set that right, he says. He sees himself as a brilliant negotiator and his 1987 book [The Art of the Deal](#) is said to have sold over a million copies. However, it is also claimed by business professors Malhotra and Moore in a scathing article in Fortune that the ghost writer subsequently claimed that he had to put 'a lot of lipstick on the pig' too portray Trump as a great negotiator. On the contrary, they argue, the evidence for Trump's negotiating skills 'is damning' and 'The art of illusion he knows well. The art of the deal he does not.'

Whatever Trump's negotiating skills, or the lack of them, there is a more substantial reason why his desire to renegotiate America's place in the world is unwise. Basically, as Nedal and Nexon argue in [Foreign Policy](#) the present US-dominated 'Liberal International Order' was put in place when the United States was at the height of its power, which has inevitably declined since then:

[Much of this order has its] origins in years immediately following the World War II, when the United States' relative power was at its historical peak. Europe and Asia's military and economic capabilities lay in tatters. Most of the developing world was under colonial rule. The Soviet Union stood a distant second to the United States in nearly every measure of power—the sole exception being conventional ground forces.

Not only was the United States' share of global power unprecedented, but also the emerging Cold War left states hostile to the Soviet Union with few alternatives to the United States. During the 1940s and 1950s, Washington created a network of alliances that, in turn, gave it enormous influence over its partners' security policies.

And, of course, it gained influence over much else besides security policies—from international economic institutions such as the World Trade Organization (also [under fire](#) from Trump) to an extensive web of economic and legal agreements and institutions.

There is surely a huge danger here, especially in East Asia. Trump has been squandering the soft power strengths that the US has built over 70 years. He has spurned the US-dominated international liberal order, its institutions and alliances. He has raised tension with China over threats to deny access to its islands in the South China Sea and talk of abandoning the One China Policy. Whether this was done out of [ignorance](#) is unclear, but when China faced up to his bluster he backed down, temporarily at least. The abandonment of TPP has been especially damaging and galling to [Abe Shinzo](#). More widely there is talk of countries who had signed up to TPP looking now to China to lead trade development in the Asia/Pacific. North Korea will not be cowed by its threats, and in the absence of negotiations or even, as the Chinese have recently [suggested](#) (endorsing in fact an earlier proposal from Pyongyang) of tension reduction by cancelling the [huge military exercises](#) (300,000+troops) in exchange for a moratorium on missiles and nuclear tests, will continue to develop its nuclear deterrent.

As the failures of Trump's policies become increasingly evident, there is a strong possibility that his thoughts will turn to war. He seems psychologically disposed to [abusive exercise of power](#). As host of a reality TV program, he was limited to shouting 'You're fired,' but as president of the United States he unfortunately has more power, if not more wisdom.

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