

## **With an Iran Deal, Trump Returns to Realism**

*di Gerard Baker*

Not for the first time, we may be on the brink of a [deal](#) to end the war with [Iran](#). If this one holds, President Trump is to be congratulated, not pilloried. He faces a choice between high-risk escalation with an uncertain outcome and cutting our losses with an imperfect deal.

But there could be a bigger strategic reason to be grateful. Handled right, this moment presents an opportunity to return to the deployment of an assertive realism in U.S. foreign policy over the idealistic siren call that again lured an American president onto the treacherous rocks of [geopolitics](#)-remaking, regime-changing interventionism.

The argument against this war was never that it was unjustified. The Iranian regime has American blood on its hands. We would be safer and the world a better place if it were gone or at least disarmed.

The case against it concerned whether this war was prudent—whether we could achieve our aims with the resources we were prepared to commit. After a month of bombing that damaged but [didn't destroy](#) Iran's missile capabilities, that [failed to eliminate](#) its nuclear materials, and that [handed the regime control](#) of one of the world's most important shipping lanes, it became clear we couldn't achieve those goals at an acceptable price. The [depletion of munitions](#), [economic damage](#) and escalating harm to American prestige and strategic interests made the effort—and still more so, further escalation—not worth it.

So, after another unhappy flirtation with the failed idea that America can remake the world with just the right amount of will, there's a good chance Mr. Trump will revert to the foreign-policy doctrine that served him well before Feb. 28.

The search for a definitive typology of Trumpian foreign policy has been going on since he came to office. To me it's clear Mr. Trump operates on what we might call a

Hobbesian principle. The 17th-century English writer Thomas Hobbes [painted](#) a hypothetical picture of human relations rooted in a state of nature—one without laws, norms or social institutions—in which the position men occupied and the power they wielded were determined, as in nature, simply by strength or weakness.

As a theory of political power relations, the idea was famously illustrated centuries earlier by the Greek historian Thucydides in his “History of the Peloponnesian War,” when the Athenians brought the [rebellious island of Melos](#) to heel and parleyed on what to do with its inhabitants. The nasty, brutish view prevailed and its cynical operating principle was applied: “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”

This uber-realist approach to international relations has been rejected by foreign-policy experts for both practical and moral reasons. But you can make the case that Mr. Trump had a clearer understanding of modern geopolitics than the experts, and nudged America in its direction in recent years.

For decades American power was constrained by its willing participation in a system of international rules, alliances and institutions. This worked for us, because it helped create a global system we led. But in recent years the case for the rules-based system has eroded. It was failing before Mr. Trump came to Washington, exploited by allies and enemies alike. European and Asian allies had free-riden on the American alliance. China had taken advantage of the rules to advance its own interests. Russia blew through it completely with repeated invasions of its neighbors.

The case for an approach tilted more toward the raw pursuit of American interests on the basis of raw American power is compelling. But that power needs to be exercised judiciously. That is more or less what Mr. Trump did before the folly of Epic Fury—in his first term with targeted [military operations](#) against Qassem Soleimani and [ISIS terrorists](#) and [economic confrontation](#) with China; in his second with the [destruction](#) of Iranian nuclear facilities last year and the [capture](#) of Nicolás Maduro in January.

Realism must embrace reality. The president has discovered that in both the economic and the military fields there are limits to what the U.S. can achieve with its

power. Last year he backed off an all-out economic war with China when Beijing demonstrated it had [economic power](#) of its own. Iran has now demonstrated there are limits to what we can achieve militarily at a reasonable cost.

Geopolitical realism—selective and opportunistic military endeavors and the targeted use of economic power—can still work to advance our interests. But this realism may also require us to do things Mr. Trump hasn't been so good at, such as working with allies, even feckless ones, or listening to the [advice](#) of a friend like Volodymyr Zelensky, with whom we might have inflicted greater damage on a strategic rival, rather than [one](#) like Benjamin Netanyahu, in a project that ended up doing us more harm than good.

The Hobbesian approach isn't very idealistic. It doesn't appeal to the American instinct for moral as well as material superiority. But the naked pursuit of our national interest is a surer route to the survival of our values than the fruitless chasing of unrealistic aspirations.