Interview – Andrew Gawthorpe

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Andrew Gawthorpe is a historian of the United States at Leiden University. As well as his academic work, he writes widely for popular media, including *The Guardian*, hosts a podcast, and publishes a newsletter called *America Explained* (free trial available). Andrew is currently working on a five-year research project on 'American foreign policy and liberalism', funded by the Dutch Research Council. He was previously the author of*To Build as well as Destroy: American Nation Building in South Vietnam*. Before coming to Leiden he was a postdoctoral researcher on the International Security Program at the Harvard Kennedy School, a teaching fellow at the UK Defense Academy, and a civil servant in the UK Cabinet Office.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The work I find most interesting at the moment is that which explores the role of ideas in American foreign policy. The story that America tells about itself is very much framed by an idea – that this is a country which is, in Abraham Lincoln's phrase, dedicated to a proposition. You see this expressed in the concept of a "liberal international order" which is supposedly an internationalized version of America's own domestic liberalism. But America has never been fully liberal at home, and it's not fully liberal in its foreign policy either. We have much more to do to explore the ways in which diverse ideologies have influenced American foreign policy throughout history and in the present day. Matthew Karp's book *This Vast Southern Empire*, which explores the role of pro-slavery ideology in the making of early American foreign policy, is a great example.

I think it's also very important for us to highlight the ways in which changing economic and geopolitical circumstances produce alterations in ideas. A relatively open world economy is a tenet of liberal internationalism, and it made sense to American policymakers when it worked for America. Now that it is empowering the rise of China and becoming a political liability in deindustrialized Midwestern swing states, U.S. policymakers in both parties are moving away from the idea of economic openness. Insofar as there has ever been something called a "liberal international order", American support for it has arguably had more to do with its benefits for America than because the country is dedicated to a proposition.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Trump's election had a big impact on me. Firstly, it made me realize that American foreign policy is potentially more changeable than I had previously assumed. Before 2016 I would never have said that someone could get elected and stay popular within their own party – much less as a *Republican* – while praising Vladimir Putin and Saddam Hussein, calling American intelligence agents "Nazis", and advocating an end to American internationalism. I don't really believe that Trump's supporters were motivated by his foreign policy views, but rather that they just didn't feel a strong enough allegiance to internationalism for it to matter either way. That creates space for dramatic alterations to American foreign policy by someone who is ideologically coherent and skilled at governing, of which Trump was neither.

Likewise, I never would have said that American democracy and adherence to the basic values of the constitution is as fragile as it appears to be after Trump. What makes the Trump story truly remarkable to me is that almost none of

the chaos he causes has anything to do with differences of principle, but merely his attempts to do whatever is best for Donald Trump. After his recent indictment, the U.S. is now hurtling towards a potential constitutional crisis or major outbreak of violence. And over what? Not some great ideological question, but the fact Trump wanted to keep a bunch of classified documents in his bathroom and show them off to impress his buddies. America's founding generation was quite aware of the dangers that might be posed by demagogues like Trump seeking their own base self-advancement, but I think many of us had forgotten.

Those goes beyond my immediate academic interests, but right now I'm spending a lot of time thinking about the impact that generative AI like ChatGPT will have on humanity. Generative AI works by taking in information and connections that we humans have created and then arranging them in sometimes novel ways. Is that real creativity? Are humans actually engaged in doing anything different 99% of the time? If we're not, then what separates us from AI? These questions will not just have profound economic, cultural and political impacts – including on international relations – but also make us rethink the very things that make us human.

How has the way Democrats and Republicans approach foreign policy changed in recent years?

Some of the most interesting shifts are bipartisan. Both parties are united in seeing China as the major threat to the United States, and they're also relatively united on what to do about it. This transition away from a focus on terrorism and towards China started in the Obama presidency with his "pivot to Asia" and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which came to be regarded as the core not just of a new economic structure but also a potential security coalition to contain China. Trump looked at China mostly through the lens of the impact of trade on the domestic U.S. economy, so he started a trade war with China but he also gave Beijing a huge gift by walking away from the TPP, which he thought would harm the American economy. Biden has then turbo-charged the focus on China by framing large parts of his domestic agenda as necessary in order to compete with China and by entering a state of permanent economic warfare against Beijing. It's in the economic and technological realm that much of this struggle will be waged, and in a complicated and interdependent global economy, Democrats are more suited to it than today's Republican Party because they take alliances and policy detail more seriously.

As for things which are specifically Republican, it's hard to say today what the Republican approach to foreign policy is. Is it just whatever Donald Trump's whims are, or is it something more systematic and thoughtful? During Trump's presidency it was a mixture of both, with the career officials and think-tankers keeping a grip on some details but Trump's personality and preferences shaping the U.S. approach to most of the big questions. Trump's fetish for authoritarian leaders has certainly intensified some pre-existing tendencies in the GOP to admire foreign strongmen such as Vladimir Putin, and I think the relative unconcern that the Trumpier portions of the party show over Russia's invasion of Ukraine will have consequences if Republicans win the next election.

Finally, generational dynamics among the Democrats mean that the party's views on foreign policy have evolved less than one might have expected in recent years. To put it bluntly, Biden is really old, and the people he surrounds himself with tend to be older too, which means that the party's foreign policy has remained more static than it otherwise might have done. After Biden leaves the scene, the center of gravity in the party will become dramatically younger, and that's likely to mean changes in foreign policy – a much stronger emphasis on climate change and a more critical stance towards Israel, for example. How the party evolves on China remains to be seen – the Biden administration itself has done more than any previous one to fashion a strategy to constrain China, and it has done so with relatively little dissent from within its own party. As the risks of direct conflict with China rise, that's likely to change.

Did Trump's presidency create any real challenge to the current liberal nternational order?

Yes and no. Trump's stated intentions certainly posed a challenge to the ideas and institutions which we commonly see as part of the liberal international order. But in practice, he didn't

implement many of them. This was for many reasons, most notably in my view the fact that at the end of the day he is just not that interested in the details of governing. He failed to generate the bureaucratic momentum or political will to

actually create dramatic change. He prefers to tweet. There's a plan to make him more action-oriented next time around, but I'm skeptical that it will work.

Where Trump did create the most consequential challenge to liberal ideas and institutions was actually in the way he acted at home. This wasn't purposeful – it's just that he showed that he's willing to rip apart institutions and norms in order to protect his own interests. This culminated in the January 6th insurrection, the first non-peaceful transfer of power at the federal level in American history. The fact that things like that can happen in the United States is an enormous boon to opponents of democracy and the rule of law worldwide. It has a much greater impact than Trump's criticism of NATO or his trade war with China.

What is your assessment of the current relationship between China and the US? Does it represent a continuation of great power politics?

China and the United States face a problem which greatly affects the future of the entire world: how to peacefully negotiate China's rise. The consequences of a war between the two could be catastrophic, particularly if it escalated to the nuclear level. Avoiding that war should be the most important goal of the Sino-American relationship, and it requires careful action by both sides. Washington has to make its security guarantees to allies in the region crystal clear in order to avoid inviting Chinese miscalculation. At the same time, it has to accept that the unipolar moment is over, and that China isn't a new Soviet Union. China's integration into the world economy and its growing economic and military power are such that it cannot be contained and destroyed in the same way the USSR was. If Washington gives Beijing the impression that it is aiming to strangle a rising China in the cradle, that invites the conflict which both should be seeking to avoid.

Unfortunately, there are many issues between the two countries which appear zero-sum, such as the future of Taiwan and the status of the South China Sea. Washington has right and international law on its side in these cases, but this can promote a kind of inflexibility that can lead to conflict. Is attempting to defend Taiwan – and perhaps failing anyway – worth watching nuclear bombs explode over Los Angeles, San Diego and Shanghai? Is defending freedom of navigation in the South China Sea worth the loss of much of the American Navy? There aren't easy answers to these questions, which is why they're the ones most likely to get the world into trouble.

Right now, relations between Washington and Beijing are poor, which is unfortunate but perhaps will stimulate some serious thinking about long-term risk on both sides. China often reacts to diplomatic downturns by just stopping talking – even refusing to pick up the crisis hotline – which is really bad. It would be better to do the thinking and talking now when the problems are spy balloons and microchip sanctions rather than amphibious landings and sunken ships.

What do you see as the most pressing issues facing US foreign policy? How should they be addressed?

Aside from China, Russia is obviously a very important challenge. Ukraine's heroic resistance saved Washington from having to make some very tough choices last year, but in the long term it's not at all clear how to build a sustainable architecture of European security. I'm skeptical that Ukraine will ever join NATO, but the U.S. should make sure that Kiev has everything it needs to convince Russia that it's too hard of a target to come back for in two or five or ten years. Once the possibility of Russia getting what it wants via aggression is foreclosed, maybe it can be convinced to become a status quo power.

The U.S. is still struggling to find the big-picture idea which will be used to frame the challenges of the coming decades. Biden's idea of a global struggle between democracies and autocracies doesn't pass the test of scrutiny because the U.S. has many autocratic partners. A coalition to constrain China has to be based on something more noble than the desire to maintain a balance of power favorable to the West, but there's remarkably little attempt to provide a superior framing. In the economic realm, the U.S. has begun co-opting many of the Chinese tactics which it previously decried. We seem to be headed for a world of more or less clearly delineated power blocs. But on what ideological basis?

Finally, America's internal problems pose big foreign policy challenges. Ideological polarization means that policies flip rapidly between administrations and that it can be difficult to do the routine tasks of governing, like raising the debt ceiling. More broadly, Trump poses an ongoing threat to American democracy and the rule of law which also does a lot to undermine American foreign policy. A refusal by Trump to accept a loss in 2024, or conduct in office similar to or worse than last time if he wins, will do enormous damage to American interests around the world.

You have suggested there has been a "Trumpification" of the UK conservative party. Can you expand on what this means – what were the similarities to Trumps time in Office? What impact has this had on UK Foreign Policy?

British politicians have often picked up rhetoric and strategies from American politics – look at Thatcher and Reagan, or New Labour and Bill Clinton. That's continued with Trump and the post-Brexit Conservative Party. There are a few areas where this is really apparent to me. The most important is that the party and its media allies have foregrounded a critique of issues like anti-racism, transgender rights and "wokeism" in general. This discussion often takes places through a cultural lens rather than in terms of concrete policies, and meanwhile the main thrust of actual Tory *policy* is fiscal conservatism – austerity.

That's very similar to how Trump operated, at least before the pandemic – he was very skilled at creating endless controversies over cultural issues which sucked up media attention, while meanwhile he governed as a very traditional, business-friendly Republican. In both cases there's an attempt to win over lower-income and lower-educated voters with the cultural stuff while pursuing policies which are economically very harmful to those same groups.

This was a logical way for the Tory party to go after Brexit anyway. Brexit creates huge economic problems for the UK, many of which fall disproportionately on lower-income voters, for instance through increased food prices. The Tories obviously don't want to talk about that, so it's logical for them to shift the conversation to something else – and the culture wars dovetail nicely with what was already a very divisive cultural split over Brexit. So there's a Britain-specific context to this, but the influence of Trumpism is clearly there in the details.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Everyone's path is different, and the people who end up doing this for a living are usually the beneficiaries of a good degree of luck as well as skill. Also, I'm a historian who engages heavily with IR, so my path probably looks different to that of many IR scholars. Some general advice I can offer is to keep your career in perspective and be wary of trying to make it your main source of meaning and validation. There's a tendency for academics to let their career subsume their identity, which can be a big mistake. Having other sources of meaning in your life – family, hobbies, even non-academic work – keeps you sane and happy. I hesitate to add this because it's very much not the point, but it also makes you a better and more rounded scholar.

Another piece of advice I would give is that to do this job you need not so much a thick skin but rather an appreciation of the open-ended nature of the academic enterprise. Criticism and controversy are all part of this process, and you can learn a lot even from people you disagree with. When you're on the receiving end of it, don't be discouraged but rather see it as an opportunity for growth and for reaching a fuller understanding of your own positions and ideas.