



Will U.S. Protests and Crackdowns Damage America's Global Image?

Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig

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Emma Ashford: What a week. As a student of history, I used to wonder what it would feel like to live through big, earth-shattering events. Now that we're in the middle of the biggest civil unrest since 1968—on top of the pandemic—I think I understand a bit better. How are you doing?

Matthew Kroenig: I'm OK. We live in Washington, so we were in the midst of the upheaval last week. And you overlooked one of the major events. This is a triple whammy: pandemic, civil unrest, and recession. Do you think the events of the past week will affect the election?

EA: Well, there was some unexpectedly good news on the economy: Unemployment is down, not up! Of course, it's still at historically high 13.3 percent. But that was all eclipsed by the mass protests that broke out last week. Both will impact the election, I'm sure, but it's not clear how: The protests could actually galvanize President Donald Trump's base to turn out. Or they could drive up minority turnout instead. No one knows for sure.

MK: Yes. The American public seems surprisingly united on many of the big issues of the past week. Majorities believe there are racial injustices in policing and are calling for reform. But they were also worried about the violence and looting and supported efforts to restore order. There was controversy, however, about proposals to use the uniformed military in a domestic policing role, leading to a potential crisis in civil-military relations. What's your take on this development?

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Matthew Kroenig is deputy director of the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center. They debate foreign policy and the 2020 election.

EA: I think the Trump administration played a bad hand extremely badly. You can see the broad shape of a public relations strategy there: reinforce the idea of law and order for his base, signal support for police unions, and use the military to project strength. But the implementation showed how poor a strategy it was. Dispersing peaceful protesters violently so that the president could have a photo-op with an upside-down bible? Rejecting the requests of D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser and placing troops armed with bayonets on the streets? Ordering helicopters to disrupt protests? Utter madness.

Let's talk more about the civil-military relations part of this, though. What were your thoughts?

MK: There are a couple of different issues. The first was the potential politicization of the military, with Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley present for the photo-op at St. John's Church. Esper said he didn't know the purpose of the walk and thought he was going out to view some damage and visit the troops, and Milley later apologized saying he "shouldn't have been there."

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The second was whether it is appropriate to use the U.S. military in a domestic policing role. The professional national security and defense community seemed to be united on both of these issues: The military should stay out of politics and that these protests did not rise to the level of requiring a military response even if it is justified in some cases when accompanied by a state request for help, such as in 1992 when California Gov. Pete Wilson asked for military backup to quell the Rodney King riots.

EA: On the second issue, I think we often underestimate how often the military is called in to do disaster relief or policing domestically. But it's almost always the national guard and rarely federal troops.

This was different and strange, with the president almost ordering an occupation of D.C. with a ragtag group of federal forces, against the wishes of the population, protesters, and the city government. It's a reminder that the U.S. capital is not a state and is effectively disenfranchised.

And it was mostly unnecessary, too. Social media was full of pictures of my empty office at the Cato Institute, almost a mile from the White House, surrounded by Humvees, a tanker, and a bunch of military police and Drug Enforcement Administration agents. We had a window

smashed early on, but that was about it. Why we needed to fortify that block as if it was the Baghdad Green Zone, I have no idea.

MK: Well, since you ask, I was tired of you beating me in these debates, so I called in some reinforcements.

EA: Very funny. But that first issue is more interesting. Realistically, neither Esper nor Milley should have been there. And it became even more controversial the next day, when Esper tried to withdraw the troops from D.C., the White House pushed back, and Esper was apparently almost fired. Do you have any thoughts on that?

MK: Esper must have been feeling some intense competing pressures. He was facing strong criticism from the national security community. The day before, a member of his defense policy board, James Miller, resigned in protest of Esper's presence in Lafayette Square.

EA: Not just that! Former Defense Secretary James Mattis finally came out and denounced Trump, after repeatedly refusing to do so during impeachment and other previous crises. It's rare—and generally frowned on—for senior retired military officials to opine on political matters. If he's worried about civil-military relations, and about the president "trying to turn Americans against one another," it seems as if there really is a consensus that Trump overstepped badly.

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And the United States' rivals didn't hesitate to highlight the chaos. At the very least, they're able to use these signs of division as propaganda.

MK: Yes. Russia, China, and Iran all tried to draw a moral equivalence between the unrest in the United States and their own gross human rights abuses.

EA: I really don't like to engage in whataboutism, but don't they have a point? The Trump administration tear-gassed clergy and removed them from church property for a photo-op. The State Department literally has programs designed to watch for that kind of thing in other countries.

MK: This was not a shining moment for the United States. But there is a huge difference between the regrettable episode here and the things our adversaries do: shoot critical journalists in the back, hang LGBT people, or keep 1 million ethnic minorities locked up in “reeducation” camps.

EA: Fair enough, but “they’re worse than us” is unlikely to be a winning slogan! The key question, I think, is whether this is a serious or even deadly blow to U.S. soft power and prestige around the world. The key question, I think, is whether this is a serious or even deadly blow to U.S. soft power and prestige around the world. For me, I’m not sure it will add much to a ledger already groaning from the weight of the Iraq War, George W. Bush, and the Trump administration’s many insults. What about you?

MK: I think this was a blow to U.S. soft power. I heard from allied officials this week about how these events negatively affected their view of the United States. But there is some hypocrisy there as well. The United States has its problems, but which country is doing better on race relations? Italians make monkey noises at black soccer players, and Japanese society practices routine racial discrimination.

EA: Don’t remind me. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has published articles calling African children racial slurs and referring to watermelons.

MK: Whether this is a serious long-term blow to American soft power depends on what happens next. One thing that makes the United States different is that most Americans do genuinely believe in our stated ideals and strive to improve. One thing that makes the United States different is that most Americans do genuinely believe in our stated ideals and strive to improve. We became a freer and stronger nation after the Civil War and the civil rights movement. These are dark times, but I hope we can emerge with more equality at home and greater influence abroad.

EA: That would require better leadership. Here’s a fun story you might enjoy at the intersection of leadership and propaganda: The president is retweeting conspiracy theories from a journalist on One America News Network. She’s Russian, previously worked for Sputnik, and is known for spreading crazy conspiracy theories.

The network itself is a cesspool of extreme right-wing conspiracies, but it’s been gaining the president’s favor recently, with even Fox News increasingly unwilling to defend him. Seems pretty hard to push back on disinformation when it’s the president himself spreading it, no?

MK: We all need to get much more sophisticated about how we consume information, including the president. Russia’s disinformation efforts can be sophisticated, and open societies like the United States are vulnerable to foreign penetration.

Russia may have scored another victory this week with reports that the United States could pull troops out of Germany. Russia may have scored another victory this week with reports that the United States could pull troops out of Germany, in part to punish it for not spending enough on defense. This would be a mistake. The United States is there not primarily as a favor to Germany but also because it is good for the United States. Washington benefits from geopolitical stability in Europe.

But I suspect you would be happy for U.S. troops there to come home?

EA: I'd be happy to see a lot more U.S. troops around the world come home, and this is no exception. European states are rich, prosperous, and technologically advanced. They're more than capable of doing the job of conventional defense without American troops permanently stationed there. Russia is hardly the Soviet Union, after all.

But there are a couple of other issues here. One point is that bases in Germany today often serve more as logistics hubs for U.S. adventures in the Middle East than anything else. I doubt Trump—a president who has dramatically increased the U.S. presence in that region—understands that. Add to that some doubt about whether the troops are coming home at all or whether they're being sent to Poland as part of the on-again, off-again “Fort Trump” project.

MK: I agree that Germany should be doing much more for its own defense. Its army is so poorly equipped—it trains with broomsticks instead of firearms. But a U.S. presence and leadership are still necessary to make NATO work. And while Russia is not the Soviet Union, it is dangerous. I worry most about a fait accompli attack against the vulnerable Baltic States. Poland would be the center of gravity in such a war, so there is a need to enhance NATO forces there. And reinforcements would have to come from Germany—which is why force levels there are important.

EA: This kind of argument almost makes me feel as if we're living on Earth 2.0 and debating a hypothetical President Hillary Clinton's decision to move more troops to Europe. We can debate the merits, but it almost feels pointless.

Instead, we have a president who has openly expressed his desire that the United States should get out of NATO, and who is withdrawing troops from Germany to spite Angela Merkel, but is sending them to Poland instead—because Poland offered to bribe him by naming a base after him. It's just not coherent. And it's hard to see what good moving troops around does in that situation, no matter which side of the debate you take.

MK: As I've recommended for three years now, watch what the Trump administration does, not what it says. The messaging is disjointed. But the United States has declared the return of great-power rivalry with Russia and China the foremost priority, and it has strengthened U.S. defenses in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, including increasing defense spending for NATO and apparently now enhancing forces in Poland.

EA: I used to agree with this. But I think it's been getting harder and harder for the so-called "adults in the room" to undermine the president's whims. I think it's been getting harder and harder for the so-called "adults in the room" to undermine the president's whims. In year one of his presidency, the Pentagon would have managed to slow-roll this. Now, his appointees are mostly acting rather than confirmed, far more beholden to him, and far more willing to implement his strange whims. If Trump wins a second term, I think his own opinions will have far more sway than those strategy documents will.

MK: Well, if that happens, we will be back here to debate it.

EA: Yes, but the way things have been going, he'll withdraw those troops, put them in D.C., and we'll be barricaded in our offices again.

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