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Understanding Trumpism: the New President's Foreign Policy

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Abstract: This article argues that the president does not have a grand strategic vision, aside from a vague conviction that the liberal world order is not benefiting the U.S. Instead, at the heart of Trumpism is an effort to mobilize and maintain the support of the president's political base, which is displeased with the direction of the country, around a message of staunch nationalism, anti-elitism, and anti-globalization. It appears to be working.

Keywords: USA, Donald Trump, foreign policy, liberal world order

1 Introduction

„America First" is the catchphrase Donald Trump uses to describe his foreign policy. It is reminiscent of the credo of some conservative nationalists prior to the Cold War, who called on the United States to avoid entanglement in the problems in Europe and East Asia and to focus on maximizing the national interest. In some ways, America First is an apt catchphrase for Trump's objectives. He has sought (albeit inconsistently) to downplay the importance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and alliances with Japan and South Korea. He has also harshly criticized the liberal world order. According to Trump, the network of security alliances, free trade agreements, and international organizations that the United States has promoted since the early Cold War era has been good for other countries, and for members of the globalist elite, but it has been bad for many – especially working class – Americans.

Overall however the historical echoes of America First mislead more than they elucidate. That is because, for all of its superficial similarities to the 1930s and early 1940s, the context for Trump's tenure is very different. The U.S. is not a rising world power that can remain separate from Eurasia's troubles by virtue of its geographic isolation, as policymakers could plausibly (if not accurately) maintain before the Second World War. Instead, it is a superpower that is in gradual decline relative to rising powers, such as China, and resurgent ones, such as Russia. Time and space have also been dramatically compressed, so that problems and threats anywhere in the world can affect the U.S. in a matter of minutes, or even instantaneously. Even the myth of Fortress America is no longer sustainable.

Cultural and economic resentment also operate differently in the contemporary U.S. Whereas suffering was widespread during the Great Depression – the unemployment rate reached 25 percent at one point and remained in double digits throughout – it is more limited now. Certainly, the economic pain in certain regions and among key demographics is acute, and wages for a majority of Americans have stagnated. However, globalization has also been good for many communities and has more of a political constituency than commentators often acknowledge. Scholars disagree as to the extent to which this economic suffering is driving the resurgence of outright racism and virulent nativism among culturally conservative whites, but to an extent this debate is irrelevant. What matters is that many Americans are angry and convinced that politicians don't care about people like them. The result is an opening for a new kind of politician and a break from traditional statecraft.

Enter Donald J. Trump. In spite of the near universal condemnation he has endured from the chattering classes, there is a method to the madness of his foreign policy. To be sure, it has little to do with acting as leader of the free world, as every U.S. president since Harry Truman has done. Nevertheless, look carefully enough and America First begins to make a perverse kind of sense, at least from Trump's perspective. In order to understand how, we need to consider three factors: the nature and origins of the president's worldview, the political context in which it has emerged, and his primary objectives over the next few years. Only then can we begin to assess the likely consequences of the president's approach.

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2 The Nature and Origins of Trump's Statecraft

Given his incoherence and inconsistency in interviews and public statements, it is tempting to conclude that Trump has no genuine convictions. However, this is not entirely accurate. In fact, over the years he has repeatedly voiced a specific set of concerns.[1] At the heart of his worldview is a conviction that the United States is getting a poor deal from the liberal world order. In essence, he argues, the U.S. has provided protection for nations such as Germany and Japan at the same time that those countries run large trade surpluses. The U.S. has paid the security bills, he contends, while Berlin and Tokyo have gotten rich. To make matters worse, as Trump tells it, all of this has come at the expense of the American worker, who has seen his wages fall dramatically in real terms, if he is lucky, or seen his job shipped overseas if he is not. Trump has vowed to end this state of affairs by negotiating better deals with allies and trading partners, imposing punitive tariffs if necessary, and even seizing strategic resources such as oilfields.

This aspect of America First has engendered scorn from experts. Mercantilism is an outdated concept, they argue, and if the U.S. were to embrace it the international economy would be destabilized. Many nations would be impoverished, including the U.S. in the long run. While this assessment is almost certainly correct, to an extent it misses the point. Namely, that even if the president understood the likely consequences of his vision – which he probably does not – it would not deter him. That is because Trump sees no link between the interests of the United States and the viability of the liberal world order.

Therefore, instead of the conservative or liberal internationalism that characterized the approaches of all of his post-World War 2 predecessors, the overarching theme that unites the different aspects of Trump's worldview is nationalism. However, it is not the principled, conservative nationalism of a figure such as Senator Robert Taft. Instead, it is an emotional, reactive, nostalgic nationalism. His campaign slogan was, after all, „make America great *again*".

Some have drawn parallels between Trump and Andrew Jackson, the 19th century president who oversaw the forced resettlement of many Native Americans, posed as the champion of the common (white) man, and battled the establishment over issues such as the Second Bank of the United States.[2] While Trumpism has some distinctly Jacksonian traits – including its disdain for elites, its aggressive patriotism, and its appeal to small town and rural whites – it also differs in key respects.

Most importantly, Trumpism is framed explicitly as a rejection of globalization and internationalism – neither of which were concerns in Jackson's day – and invokes a mythical past in which life was better and easier for working class whites. The answer to this threat, according to the president, is to overturn not only the political establishment in Washington, D.C. but also to disengage from the liberal economic order that the U.S. has cultivated since the end of World War Two. Avoiding new trade deals, confronting trading partners that have allegedly taken advantage of the U.S., such as China and Mexico, and renegotiating or withdrawing from existing treaties such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, he has consistently argued, is the only way bring prosperity back to the working class.

Reference to the Jacksonian tradition does not provide much insight into this aspect of Trumpism and the same could be said of conservative nationalism. Much more useful in this regard is an exploration of the tenets of a different area of the conservative intellectual universe: paleoconservatism. Though there is no consensus about the precise contours of this school of thought, most scholars would agree that it encompasses a belief in traditional social values, opposition to centralized federal power, paranoia about foreign influences, and an aggressive, albeit noninterventionist, strain of nationalism. Perhaps the most prominent paleoconservative is Pat Buchanan, a former speechwriter for Richard Nixon who ran for president in the 1990s. Not coincidentally, he also embraced the slogan „America First".[3]

This means that Trump's policies are not sui generis. They draw upon a pre-existing intellectual tradition, albeit one that previously had only a limited impact on national politics. This raises a question: why did Trump – who, aside from his fixation on trade, has been wildly inconsistent in his political positions over the years – embrace a set of ideas that has not traditionally led to electoral success? In order to understand why, it is necessary to consider the ways in which the political landscape has evolved in recent years and how Trump has taken advantage of these changes.

1 Wright 2016.

2 Mead 2017.

3 Cf. Nash 1996, 337 – 339.

3 The Political Context: Declining Support for the Liberal World Order

For decades after the end of World War 2, elites in both main political parties supported an internationalist foreign policy. They believed that promoting the liberal world order was in the interest of the U.S. The public, which saw their standard of living rise steadily, largely agreed. Those that questioned this conventional wisdom, such as the John Birch Society, were dismissed as extremists.

That has changed in recent years as many have begun to question the bipartisan consensus in favor of vigorous international engagement. For instance a plurality of Americans – and a firm majority of Republicans – believe that the international economy harms the U.S. (Democrats remain, on balance, favorably disposed toward an internationalist foreign policy.) And though overall support for security alliances remains relatively strong, Trump's most enthusiastic supporters stand out as being more wary of overseas duties and obligations when it comes to issues such as NATO, refugees, or foreign aid.[4]

What are the reasons for this dramatic evolution? To begin with, there is a multifaceted crisis among working class whites. One part is economic. Working class whites have borne the brunt of the economic changes that have revolutionized the U.S. economy in recent decades. The exodus of jobs in some traditional manufacturing industries has devastated communities in places such as the Midwest and the Southeast. The effect of these hardships has been more than just economic; it has led to a growing sense of pessimism about the future and even shorter lifespans.[5]

This crisis has created the conditions for a profound transformation in U.S. political culture that has been manifested in several respects. One is the recrudescence of outright racism and various forms of white nationalism. Another is the radicalization of the Republican Party. Political scientists have concluded that the majority of the increase in political polarization is a consequence of the Grand Old Party (GOP) moving rightward.[6] Conservative voters and activists, angered by the perception that party leaders are concerned only with catering to the interests of wealthy donors and corporations, have grown distrustful of Republican politicians and now demand radical changes, especially when it comes to immigration and trade policy.

Hence the GOP, once a center-right party, has become very conservative, with a number of consequences. One is increasingly extreme behavior. This includes threatening to shut down the government or provoke a default on the government's debt in order to extract policy concessions from Democrats. Another problem is the promotion of conspiratorial thinking. For instance, nearly three quarters of Republican voters doubt that Barack Obama is a U. S. citizen.[7]

Trump did not create this set of circumstances, but he is the first politician with the skill to take advantage of it. Indeed his presidential campaign, for all of its amateurism, was astutely designed to cater to the radicalization of the GOP and to the desire of conservative voters for an atypical politician with a different kind of agenda. And if much of Trump's rhetoric was notably less radical just a few years ago – for instance, in 2012 he told CNN that he did not believe in deporting large numbers of illegal immigrants – this did not seem to bother the people that voted for him. They like his crude language and penchant for insults and the fact that, so far, he appears to intend to keep his campaign promises in regard to immigration, trade, and terrorism. As the election exit polling data demonstrated, Trump won the overwhelming majority of voters who prioritized these issues.[8]

Low approval ratings *are* a concern for Trump at the moment. However, more important is the evidence indicating that his political base is happy with his performance.[9] Their continued enthusiasm for Trumpism, along with an equivalent level of support – enthusiastic or not – from the same Republicans that voted for him in the 2016 election, might just be enough to win him a second term.

4 Pew Research Center 2016, 6, 12, 22 and 48.

5 Pierce/Schott 2016; Case/Deaton 2015, Graham/Pinto 2016.

6 Barber/McCarthy 2013, 21.

7 Josh Clinton and Carrie Roush: „Poll – Persistent Partisan Divide Over 'Birther' Question", *NBC News*, 10 August 2016. www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/poll-persistent-partisan-divide-over-birther-question-n627446.

8 Jon Huang, Samuel Jacoby, Michael Strickland, Rebecca Lai: „Election 2016: Exit Polls", *New York Times online*, 8 November 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/08/us/politics/election-exit-polls.html.

9 Patti Waldmeir: „Good news for Trump from the heartlands of the Midwest". *Financial Times*, 20 February 2017; Jack Healy: „Trump Backers Like His First Draft of a New America". *New York Times*, 27 January 2017.

4 Trumpism: Foreign Policy as an Extension of Domestic Politics

This is the key to understanding Trumpism. His foreign policy is not conceptualized with a grand strategy in mind, other than a conviction that the liberal world order has not worked well for the U.S. Instead, the most important organizing principal is the need to attract and retain the support of his political base. This is why it should have been surprising to no one that he elevated his closest advisor, the white nationalist Steve Bannon, to the Principals Committee of the National Security Council, even as he demoted the Director of National Intelligence and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (though he later reversed these changes.) Bannon was responsible for honing Trump's message about the globalist elite in the homestretch of the campaign. As such, he is far more important to the president's political future than the nation's top intelligence official and its highest-ranking soldier.

Once we understand the nature of Trumpism, we can begin to draw some conclusions about his likely actions over the next four (or eight) years. It is safe to say that predictions that Trump would „normalize" once faced with the awesome responsibility of the presidency were mistaken. To be sure, key members of Trump's team are encouraging the president to adopt a more orthodox approach – essentially a mainstream form of conservative internationalism. But Trump's political instincts, which he considers infallible, and his lack of intellectual curiosity and discipline, will frequently sabotage such efforts. His disastrous meeting in March 2017 with the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, during which he was offensive and uninformed in equal measure, was a case in point.[10]

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Trump remains committed to implementing his radical campaign promises in the areas of immigration, trade policy, and terrorism. He has set in motion plans to build a build on the border with Mexico; he is actively exploring imposing tariffs on imports from Mexico and China and has sought to shame companies that are offshoring jobs; and has imposed a travel ban on a number of Muslim-majority countries (though this is being challenged in court) and approved a raid targeting al Qaeda in Yemen barely a week after taking office. Also, in a decision that astonished many observers, though it should not have – Trump is an aggressive nationalist, not an isolationist or pacifist – in April 2017 he ordered an airstrike against the Syrian government. 59 Tomahawk missiles struck an airbase from which it is widely believed the Assad regime launched a sarin gas attack on a rebel-held town.

We can expect an increase in the number of anti-terror operations in the Middle East in the coming years involving Special Forces and airpower. It is unlikely, however, that a substantial number of U.S. troops will be sent to the region – even though Trump at times has suggested this would be a possibility – because the political cost would be substantial. It is worth noting that, when it comes to combat operations abroad, there is a paradox inherent in Trump's version of America First. On one hand, it is infused with aggressive rhetoric about unfriendly nations, and often implies the use of massive military force to address threats. On the other hand, it is critical of recent interventions, such as the war in Iraq, that have become unpopular and involved large numbers of troops on the ground.

The explanation for this contradiction lies in the nature of Trumpism. Hawkish rhetoric resonates with his supporters. However, the sons and daughters of the culturally conservative and working class whites who form his base furnish a large percentage of the troops that are sent overseas and, as a result, suffered disproportionately from long deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq. How this contradiction will play out in the event of a military conflict is difficult to predict, but the most likely scenario – because it would probably be the most politically sustainable – is that there will be lots of pugnacious rhetoric and posturing, and perhaps the further use of airpower as in Syria, but no substantial deployment of troops.

This also should be the case with Iran. We will see plenty of aggressive rhetoric but, at the end of the day, the president will probably follow a course similar to the one pursued by the Obama administration. This includes reluctance to engage in substantial military operations against the Islamic Republic. That is because, in spite of reported hawkishness of advisors such as Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and Trump's campaign promise to „rip" up the nuclear deal, prolonged military confrontation with Tehran would not solve any of the region's problems (and Mattis opposes revoking the agreement). It would also force the administration to divert substantial time and energy away from its ambitious domestic agenda.

Indeed, one of the principal strengths of Trumpism during the campaign – framing foreign policy challenges in a manner that appeals to the base – is a distinct liability when it comes to policymaking. It is one thing to coin populist sound bites about disengaging from NATO and humbling China on the stump; it is another thing entirely

10 Roger Cohen, „The Offender of the Free World". *New York Times*, 28 March 2017.

to implement these policies in a way that does not invite disaster. Therefore, although the administration will continue to insist that other NATO members increase defense spending, and will show less interest in multilateral actions, such as the intervention in Libya in 2011, it is unlikely that there will be more aggressive attempts to distance the U.S. from the alliance. In addition, although we can expect a more confrontational relationship with China – especially when it comes to trade policy – it would be shocking if the president were to pursue a course that would lead to war. In fact, he has already retreated from his threat to renounce recognition of the One China policy.

Perhaps the most difficult policy question to diagnose is the relationship with Russia. The president clearly would like to facilitate a rapprochement. If he manages to do so it could yield cooperation in several areas, such as the fight against the so-called Islamic State. However, improving relations with Moscow is of little benefit politically. Rather, it has already emerged as a liability. It is one of the few topics on which some Republicans have indicated a willingness to challenge him and, if Trump does have improper ties to the Russian government – a charge for which there is no definitive proof, it should be noted – it could even threaten his presidency. It is perhaps no coincidence that the president, after signaling during the campaign that he would like to lift U.S. sanctions and might not object to further Russian assertiveness in its near abroad, has retreated to a more cautious stance.[11]

The frequent reversals and controversies that have accompanied the administration's stance toward Moscow, and other early policy challenges, are not coincidental; they are the product of a chaotic and highly politicized national security process. This is unlikely to improve anytime soon. There are several reasons for this. One is ideological: Trump and many of his closest advisors, including Steven Bannon, believe that national security decision-making has been captured by the elitist political culture that they have vowed to overturn. The result is a mistrust of traditional processes and a tendency to inject politics into what were previously apolitical institutions, such as the National Security Council.[12]

This problem is compounded by ignorance and inexperience. In the past, when a new president with little foreign policy knowledge took office, a brain trust that included at least some veteran officials was at hand. To a large extent, however, this has not been true of the Trump White House. In addition to the president's lack of knowledge about world affairs and unwillingness to learn – his national security briefings have been drastically simplified and shortened[13] – he has had trouble attracting top-level advisors. Many Republican foreign policy experts did not support him and were blacklisted as a result or refuse to work in his administration.[14]

5 Conclusion

World leaders are worried about the direction of U.S. foreign policy during the Trump era, and they should be. A dangerous mixture of belligerence, ignorance, and impetuosity thus far has characterized the president's performance. His indifference to the condition of the liberal world order – aside from trade policy, where he is actively hostile to it – leaves the future of relations with allies in Europe and Asia in doubt. And, given the way he views the world and runs the national security bureaucracy, there is little reason to believe that this will improve substantially any time soon. To be sure, some members of his administration, such as Secretary Mattis and Vice President Mike Pence, are doing their best to reassure allies and repair the worst of the damage.

However, they can only do so much, especially since other members of the administration frequently undermine their efforts. Prior to Pence's trip to Europe in February, for instance, during which he sought to demonstrate support for the transatlantic relationship, Bannon told the German ambassador to the U.S. that he viewed the European Union as terminally flawed. We should not be surprised by such counterproductive behavior. Instead, we should expect it as we plan for the next few years. Inconsistency, the politicization of diplomacy, and a lack of respect for longtime allies are, after all, natural byproducts of Trumpism.

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