



# Trump and America's Foreign Policy Traditions

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Consider the following. A president of the United States comes to Washington and challenges an entrenched bureaucracy, offends coastal elites, makes every issue a personal one, upsets Washington society, insults foreign countries, threatens war if tariffs are ignored, picks a fight with the central bank, fiercely defends US borders, mistreats non-US citizens, toys with and then fires most of his cabinet, confronts states who defy federal law, talks loudly about intervening militarily in another country but then does nothing when the opportunity arises, and blames the press for unfair coverage and reckless insults to his family.

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Who might that president be? Donald Trump, right? Wrong, it is Andrew Jackson. Jackson championed the western and southern pioneers against the established eastern elites, engaged in numerous duels and canings to defend his personal honor, insulted the French and refused to recant during negotiations for 1812 war reparations, used a confrontation over tariffs to persuade South Carolina not to secede from the Union, vetoed legislation to renew the charter of the US Central Bank, spurned a sanctimonious Washington society by standing with his war secretary's wife accused of having an abortion, thundered against Mexican forces oppressing Texan settlers and then did nothing when Texas appealed to the United States for annexation, exiled native Americans to the "trail of tears" and oblivion beyond the Mississippi, and defended America's borders against marauding Indians and filibustering Europeans (Brands 2005).

Compared with Andrew Jackson, therefore, President Trump is no outlier. If you get beyond the personality and style (not easy but let's try), Trump operates well within the guard rails of America's foreign policy traditions. Those traditions include nationalists like George Washington and Jackson who put America First, realists like Teddy Roosevelt and Richard Nixon who played the great power game of balancing power, liberal internationalists like Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt who bet on trade and multilateral institutions to resolve disputes without the balance of power, and conservative internationalists like Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan who championed freedom and pursued the democratic peace.

As he campaigns for a second term, Trump is anchored in the nationalist tradition. He places American interests first against a globalizing world that has long taken advantage of American generosity (or stupidity as Trump would say). He denounces allies who free ride on American security and claws back trade deals that steal American jobs and technology. He builds up America's defenses but reduces US military interventions abroad. And he takes diplomatic risks with China, North Korea, and Iran but uses military force only sporadically, more to intimidate than balance power or achieve specific objectives.

At the same time, Trump has realist rudders that steer him in the direction of preserving the basic features of the status quo. He is not dismantling America's Cold War alliances or withdrawing from great power relations, as nationalists would urge. He spends more not less on NATO, asks America's allies to do the same, and keeps open prospects

of good relations with authoritarian leaders in Russia, China, and North Korea.

There are even spotty undercurrents of internationalism in Trump's approach. He challenges the allies to reduce all tariffs to zero, successfully renegotiates the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA), and speaks in Poland like Ronald Reagan: “we value the dignity of every human life, protect the rights of every person, and share the hope of every soul to live in freedom” (Trump 2017d). For the greater part, however, Trump eschews internationalist traditions. He rejects new multilateral agreements like the Iran nuclear agreement, Paris Accords, and Trans-Pacific Partnership and prefers bilateral to multilateral negotiations where American leverage is uppermost. He speaks little about human rights and clearly opposes the use of military force to spread democracy.

If he gains a second term, which way will Trump swing? He may lose patience with the allies, pull American troops out of Europe and Asia, let other great powers manage regional orders, and revert to an offshore balancing strategy focused mainly on the western hemisphere. On the other hand, he may break through to achieve more balanced global security and trade agreements that keep America engaged and China on board. The result might be a much-needed course correction in globalization in which democracies share leadership on a more equitable basis and autocracies share markets on the basis of common rules.

The rest of this essay explores these observations. First it defines America's foreign policy traditions, assesses Trump's national security and foreign policy strategy (or impulses) against those traditions, and projects where Trump might be headed if he wins a second term.

## THE TRADITIONS

President H. W. Bush once famously said, “labels are for soup cans” (Bush 2016). He might have added “and for clear thinking.” Distinctions are indispensable for rational analysis. How many times have you heard the adage: “The Devil is in the details?” Well, if that's true, “God must be in the design” because long before you get to the details someone has already decided what the problem is and where you need to look for the details.

So, let's begin with some distinctions. Every country has two sides to its national security—defending its territorial safety and material well-being, and nurturing a global political environment in which it

feels comfortable. A country can improve its material circumstances by building up a strong defense. But it can also enhance its national security by cultivating politically like-minded countries on its borders and elsewhere. A world of democracies would be much less threatening to the United States than a world of authoritarian powers. Think if the United States had to defend itself today against Germany and Japan as well as Russia and China. Authoritarian countries understand this reality as well. That's why democracy in Ukraine threatens Russia and in Hong Kong China. As Robert Kagan writes, "The mere existence of democracies on their borders, the global free flow of information they cannot control, the dangerous connection between free market capitalism and political freedom — all pose a threat to rulers who depend on keeping restive forces in their own countries in check" (Kagan 2017). Little wonder that Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have both called for a rollback of the "liberal" international order.

Countries rely on two major instruments to achieve greater material safety and political comfort—force and diplomacy. Russia halted the potential alignment of Ukraine with NATO and the EU by annexing Crimea and invading eastern Ukraine. President Obama relied mostly on diplomacy to halt the Iranian nuclear program, refusing to use force except as a last resort (Nau 2015). Sometimes force substitutes for diplomacy. President Roosevelt insisted in 1943 that the war against Germany and Japan be fought to unconditional surrender, that is, no diplomatic offramp. More often, force and diplomacy interact. Diplomacy offers a way to end a war—the cease-fires in Bosnia and Kosovo—or the deployment of force leads to a diplomatic solution—President Kennedy's threat to invade Cuba securing the withdrawal of Soviet missiles.

Figure 3.1 juxtaposes these two dimensions. The matrix offers a clear way of distinguishing among America's foreign policy traditions (or the traditions of any country, see Nau and Ollapally 2012). The preference for material security vs. political comfort defines the vertical axis, the preference for force vs. diplomacy the horizontal axis.

Nationalists and realists group together in the upper quadrants of the diagram. They place primary emphasis on material or geopolitical security and do not engage in the business of building international institutions or converting countries to their particular political ideology. Internationalists group together in the lower quadrant of the matrix. They seek to surmount a decentralized world in which countries compete for geopolitical security. Liberal internationalists do this by building

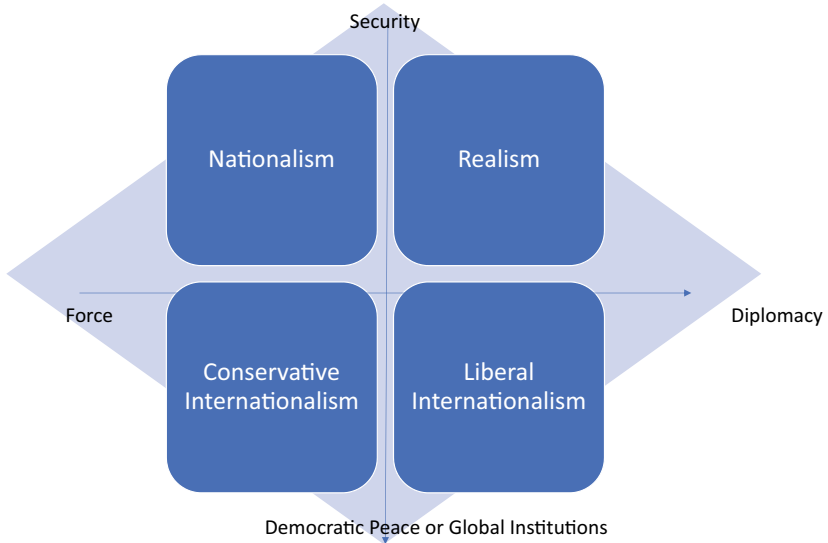


Fig. 3.1 Four types of US grand strategy

international institutions that establish procedures for resolving disputes peacefully. Conservative internationalists do it by moving more foreign countries toward democracy and establishing a democratic peace in which democratic nations remain independent but live side by side in peace.

Nationalists and conservative internationalists group together in the left-hand quadrants. They place the greatest emphasis on strong defense and use of force. They see diplomacy as effective only if it is backed up by the use of force. Realists and liberal internationalists occupy the right-hand quadrants. They pay more attention to diplomacy. Liberal internationalists hope diplomacy will eventually minimize the balance of power. Realists emphasize diplomacy (think of Henry Kissinger's book *Diplomacy* 1994) to perfect the balance of power.

Let's look more closely at each of the traditions in their respective quadrants.

### *Nationalism*

Of all the traditions, nationalism is most comfortable with the geopolitical world, namely politically unlike and competitive states balancing power to survive. It has no ambition to change the world or create a more centralized system. The nationalist system of independent states is a virtue not a vice (Hazony 2018). Every country provides for its own security and is neutral toward other countries.

George Washington established this tradition in the early American republic. In his Farewell Address, he warned against entanglement in the affairs of other countries (Washington 1796):

Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor or caprice?

It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world...

On behalf of President Monroe, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams enshrined Washington's injunction in the Monroe Doctrine (Monroe 1821):

Wherever the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her [America's] heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own...She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom...She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.

Nationalists therefore put the interests of their own country first and expect all other countries to do the same. Because their security is the primary interest, countries will defend themselves and there is no need for other countries to become involved in their defense. Under exigency, alliances may be necessary but never permanent. Trade with other countries, if you wish, but make sure you gain more than the other country.

Defend trade only if it involves vital raw materials or national security supplies. In general, stay out of the affairs of others, and they will stay out of your affairs.

In a nationalist world, there is little need for diplomacy. Power balances emerge automatically, especially since great powers offset one another in other regions—Germany against Russia in Europe, Japan against China in Asia, and so on. Rivalries between these powers will contain threats long before those threats reach America's shores. Use force therefore only if attacked and then respond with ferocity. Win victory and come home. There is no nation-building for nationalists.

The nationalist tradition remains a venerable one in American history. By staying out of European and world affairs, the nation expanded and prospered in the nineteenth century. When it joined the ranks of great powers, it entered both World War I and II late and at a decisive moment, minimizing casualties. In World War II fifty-three Russian soldiers died for every one American soldier. Today America remains the only great power separated by two oceans with no great power rival in its hemisphere. Let other great powers balance power in their regions and become alarmed only when those conflicts spill over into our hemisphere.

### *Realism*

Realists like nationalists accept the world as it is and have no desire to transform geopolitics. But unlike nationalists, realists believe it is necessary to balance power globally and in a timely way. Great powers in other regions may not react to threats in time. A hegemon or dominant power might emerge, as Nazi Germany did in Europe and Tojo Japan in Asia. That power may then intervene in the western hemisphere and threaten American interests. Germany intervened in Mexico during World War I, and Japan bombed US territory in World War II. For the realist unlike the nationalist, it is better to confront these threats before they reach America's shores. American security thus depends on preventing a hegemon from emerging in Europe or Asia. The United States cooperates flexibly with other great powers to that end. When the United States weakened after Vietnam, President Nixon allied with Maoist China to offset the increasingly powerful Soviet Union.

Maintaining world order is dangerous enough, realists argue; don't complicate it by paying too much attention to the type of domestic regime another great power may have. A balance of power accommodates states

of different political persuasions. And diplomacy is designed to deal with political adversaries not huddle together with political friends. Trade with friends, to be sure, but not with enemies because they may gain more. Even then be careful because today's friend may become tomorrow's adversary. Realists warned for some time that opening trade with China was a mistake (Mearsheimer 2001). China would simply become more powerful and not more democratic.

Realism also occupies a venerable place in American history. Alexander Hamilton urged the young republic to cooperate with Great Britain, the great power that could do the most harm to the United States. He warned against aligning with other countries based on political sentiments. He rejected the internationalist sentiment of Thomas Jefferson who favored France over Great Britain because France had a republican regime. By the end of the nineteenth century, America joined the realist club of great powers. President Teddy Roosevelt painted American naval ships white and sailed the "Great White Fleet" around the world to signal America's ascent. Eager to play the great power game, Roosevelt urged Wilson to enter World War I.

### *Liberal Internationalism*

Wilson, however, preferred a different tradition. He wanted to domesticate international affairs, convert a system of independent states pursuing national security into an international community of interdependent states pursuing collective security (Smith 2017). Instead of chasing the chameleon of the balance of power, states would pool power in a universal institution such as the League of Nations, reduce overall levels of power by disarmament, and then use collective power only with multilateral consent. They would settle disputes by diplomatic means of negotiation and arbitration and identify threats to the international community by the country (or countries) that refused to follow these peaceful procedures. The community would then impose economic sanctions on the transgressor and back it up if necessary with the military might of the entire world. In effect, the world community would function as a police force to uphold the rule of law, the same way a domestic government enforces the law in independent nations.

President Franklin Roosevelt modified Wilson's scheme in one important respect. Recognizing that great powers were unlikely to support a system in which they counted no more than small powers (the United



States refused to join the League for that reason), he gave the great powers veto rights on the United Nations Security Council. Now the system would depend on great power cooperation, a realist feature, operating inside an international institution, a liberal internationalist feature. The United Nations failed because the great powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, did not cooperate. But when the Cold War ended and the great powers did cooperate, the United Nations worked exactly as it was designed. UN forces expelled Iraq from Kuwait in 1991 and restored the sovereignty of Kuwait. It was the first and thus far only example of collective security in the history of the world. (The UN action in Korea in 1950 was authorized by the General Assembly without the consent of the Soviet Union which was boycotting the Security Council at the time).

Liberal internationalism counts heavily on interdependence to bring countries together. As two scholars of liberal internationalism explain, “as long as interdependence – economic, security-related, and environmental – continues to grow, peoples and governments everywhere will be compelled to work together to solve problems or suffer grievous harm” (Deudney and Ikenberry 2018). Whatever the type of domestic regime, authoritarian or democratic, countries will be forced to compromise and develop a habit of cooperation. Over time, the processes of international negotiations will bring about a spirit of pluralism, tolerance and mutual respect. Ideological differences among countries will narrow or not matter as much as they did before. Betting entirely on diplomacy, President Obama consistently deemphasized the role of ideology in foreign affairs (Kaufman 2016; Lieber 2016; Singh 2016).

Central to the functioning of liberal internationalism is a willingness to refrain from the use of military force until negotiations fail. Using military force before or during negotiations, as realists might advocate, only increases distrust. Tensions spiral rather than subside. Negotiations must take place free of intimidation. Only after all peaceful procedures have been exhausted is the use of force legitimate and then only with the consent of all countries, especially the great powers. When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003 without the consent of the great powers (not only Russia and China but France and Germany as well), the intervention was considered by liberal internationalists to be illegitimate (Nau 2008).

### *Conservative Internationalism*

Not all internationalists believe that interdependence is more important than ideology. Conservative internationalists worry that ideology limits peaceful cooperation. As Secretary of State James Byrnes told President Truman in 1945, “there is too much difference in the ideologies of the U.S. and Russia to work on a long term program of cooperation” (quoted in Trachtenberg 1999: 16). Even if cooperation is possible, compromise with authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China may undermine the rule of law and pollute the prospects for democracy.

Conservative internationalists worry too about refraining from the use of force before and during negotiations. Authoritarian states use force all the time. They use it at home to stay in power and abroad to expand that power. Thus, negotiations based on the use of force as a last resort abandons the playing field during negotiations to the most ruthless players. If those players can use force to change the conditions on the ground, they will negotiate until they achieve their objectives outside negotiations. Or they will gain concessions inside negotiations that match the dominance they have gained on the ground. Critics of President Obama faulted his Iran policy for precisely these reasons (Kroenig 2014). Iran continued to develop its nuclear program, test missiles and conduct aggressive operations throughout the Middle East while negotiations were underway. Meanwhile, Obama openly refrained from the use of force, expecting as he later said that the agreement itself would subsequently moderate Iran’s aggressive behavior (Nau 2015). The agreement that emerged, critics charged, favored Iran because its behavior during negotiations preempted more stringent provisions (such as banning rather than just restricting a uranium enrichment program, which was started during negotiations).

Conservative internationalists rely on force like realists but pursue more ambitious diplomatic objectives than realists. Realists preserve the status quo, conservative internationalists change it toward a more politically like-minded world of democracy. As Condoleezza Rice once put it, we seek “a balance of power that favors freedom” (Rice 2002). The way to spread freedom, however, is not through multilateral negotiations while refraining from the use of force, as liberal internationalists insist, but through “armed” diplomacy that secures incremental compromises weakening authoritarian regimes and strengthening democratic ones. As President Ronald Reagan said, the goal in the long run is: “we win; they lose.” He armed his diplomacy by building up defense capabilities,

launching the Strategic Defense Initiative, and deploying NATO intermediate range nuclear (INF) missiles in Europe. He then negotiated with the Soviet Union to eliminate INF missiles (rather than confirm the Soviet advantage that existed before negotiations) and invite the Soviet Union to join the global free market system (opening up and thereby weakening the Soviet statist economy) (Nau 2013, chapter 7).

## TRUMP AND THE TRADITIONS

Where does Donald Trump stand in light of the four major foreign policy traditions? We take a look at four areas: NATO and Japan, Middle East and terrorism, trade and immigration, human rights and developing countries. At the end of his first term, Trump's worldview straddles the nationalist/realist divide. His realism is more nationalist and defensive than global and strategic, less ambitious than the world order pursued by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger (Schweller 2018; see also Walt 2018b; Sestanovich 2017).

### *NATO and Russia*

Alliances may be the most crucial area for assessing Trump's foreign policy orientation. In this area Trump stakes out nationalist priorities combined with realist predispositions to preserve the status quo, a status quo that includes NATO and the Asian alliances as well as prospects for great power cooperation with Russia and China.

In his Inaugural Address, Trump laid out his nationalist North Star: "We will seek friendship and good will with the nations of the world, but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first. We do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone but rather to let it shine as an example" (Trump 2017a). In an earlier campaign speech, Trump was more graphic: "We will no longer surrender this country, or its people, to the false song of globalism. The nation-state remains the true foundation for happiness and harmony. I am skeptical of international unions that tie us up and bring America down, and will never enter America into any agreement that reduces our ability to control our own affairs" (Trump 2016a).

But there is nothing in these statements that Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher would not endorse. The question is what this means for America's alliances and the defense of the free world in the twenty-first

century. Are NATO and the alliances with Japan and South Korea still in America's national interest?

Trump came into office declaring: "NATO in my opinion is obsolete because it's not covering terrorism...and also you have many countries that aren't paying their fair share" (Trump 2016b). But once in office, Trump said NATO was no longer obsolete (Shiffrinson 2017). He called for reforming not dismantling alliances.

While Trump thunders against NATO in words, he strengthens it in deeds. He increased US NATO spending by 40% for troop deployments on Russia's borders (Pellerin 2017); and he sharply increased not decreased US defense expenditures overall. Defense spending, after declining from 2010–2015, went up from \$586 billion in 2015 to \$716 billion in 2019 (and a projected \$750 billion in 2020—see Stein and Gregg 2019). These steps suggest no weakening of US alliance commitments either in NATO or around the world. Moreover, Trump accelerated the trend toward higher contributions by other NATO members. NATO Members agreed in 2014 to increase their defense budgets over the next decade from the then-current average of 1.42% of GDP to 2.0% of GDP. At the time, only three Members met the 2% target; by 2019 nine members did, and fifteen are on track to reach that level by 2024 (Lawler 2018; Kupchan 2019). Increases began under Obama in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine but they accelerated under Trump. Unlike Obama who used liberal internationalist pressures to prod allies, Trump uses nationalist threats to abandon NATO as the only real leverage he has to save NATO.

The United States still accounts for 70% of all defense expenditures by NATO members even though it accounts for only 50% of NATO GDP. NATO members like to say that is because America is a world power. US military spending projects US power beyond Europe into Africa and the Middle East. True, but in Africa and the Middle East, Europe too has primary security interests. These regions are much closer to Europe than the United States. Until the allies acknowledge that they too are now world powers and assume proportionate burdens to that end, NATO may indeed fail. Yet it will not fail because of Trump. The German cabinet decided in 2019 to keep defense spending as low as 1.25% of GDP for the next five years. As Walter Russell Mead concludes, "Berlin is thumbing its nose not only at Donald Trump but at the U.S." (Mead 2019). In the short term Trump is giving the NATO allies the benefit of the doubt. He is encouraging the allies to do more while the United

States does the same. In the longer run, he is sending the Europeans a clear nationalist message. “What Mr. Trump is making clear,” former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott points out, “is what should always have been screamingly obvious: that each nation’s safety now rests in its own hands far more than in anyone else’s” (Abbott 2018).

There is no evidence that Trump’s NATO policy has weakened the West’s position with Russia. In contrast to Obama, who bent over backwards to reset relations with Moscow—scuttling NATO missile defense systems in eastern Europe and famously promising Putin he would be more flexible after the 2012 elections—Trump has managed constructive relations with Russia despite preposterous charges that he was an agent of Moscow (on Obama, see Kaufman 2016; Singh 2016). On the one hand, he has been tough, much tougher than Obama. He endorsed the placement of NATO, including US, forces on the borders of Russia for the first time since the end of the Cold War (four battalions in Poland and the Baltic states), a step that Obama supported but only after he had withdrawn in 2013, a year before Russia invaded Ukraine, the last of America’s armored combat units from NATO (Vandiver 2013). Trump authorized the sale of lethal weapons to the Ukraine government in Kiev to raise the costs of further Russian aggression, which Obama refused to do. Under Trump, US forces confronted Russian mercenary forces in Syria killing several hundred of them while Obama deferred to Russia in Syria embracing Moscow’s help to remove some chemical weapons. And Trump imposed sanctions on European firms to stop the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to supply Russian gas to European markets under the Baltic Sea, a step which Obama never seriously considered. On the other hand, even under the pressure of Moscow collusion charges, Trump kept open the possibility of cooperating with Russia—to manage ground and air conflicts with Russian forces in Syria, to update or abandon Cold War arms control agreements in Europe (INF and START), and to maintain logistical arrangements in central Asia for NATO forces in Afghanistan (Gurganas 2018). To be sure, Trump did nothing to challenge Russia’s intervention in Syria. But he inherited a bad hand. George W. Bush alienated Turkey by invading Iraq without Turkey’s support, and Obama looked the other way when Russia expanded its naval base and installed new air bases in Syria.

*Asian Alliances and China*

Trump has also defended alliances in the Pacific. His first meeting with a foreign leader after his election was with Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Over the next two years, the two leaders met ten times personally and spoke thirty other times. (Crowley 2019). For Trump Japan is the ideal ally. It is not only expanding its military role (albeit still only 1% of GDP due to domestic political constraints), it is also solidly backing American policy toward China and North Korea. The one trouble spot that threatens alliances in Asia is a lingering brouhaha over history between Japan and South Korea.

Cleansed of tweets and erratic style, Trump's approach in Asia makes sense. The key target is China. Beijing aspires to great power status, which Trump is ready to concede, but does not want to play by great power rules, which Trump is unwilling to ignore. China's power, unlike that of the former Soviet Union, depends heavily on ties with western markets and technology. Trump exploits those ties to leverage China to decide: go your own way in which case you cannot expect future markets and investments from western powers, or accept binding and enforceable commitments in the global trading system and continue to prosper as a friendly economic and political rival.

North Korea and Taiwan are the pivot of US–China tensions. When Xi Jinping took power in 2012, he abruptly changed course. He abandoned China's "peaceful rise" under Hu Jintao and fortified islands in the South China Sea (Shambaugh 2016). US policy did not provoke this U-turn. Obama's pivot to Asia was a relatively weak response, under heavy pressure for US allies, to counter China's aggressiveness. For its own internal reasons, China chose a hard right turn, most likely to contain a burgeoning middle class emboldened by China's rapid rise in prosperity. China, Xi promised, would not let the world economy unravel the communist political system the way he believes it did the Soviet Union.

As a nationalist, Trump is not unsympathetic to China's dilemma. He repeats on multiple occasions that he admires China's policy to promote Chinese interests. That's what all nationalists do. Trump is not nuzzling up to tyrants. He is simply acknowledging that all countries, allies and adversaries, think and act like nationalists. The trick is to empathize with them, determine where national interests collide and overlap, and make deals. As Trump occasionally emphasizes, the United States clearly has more overlapping interests with allies than with adversaries. That's

why the democracies line up on one side of the geopolitical divide and China, Russia, and their clients North Korea and Syria on the other. Thus Trump's beef is less with the allies than with the internationalist thinking of his predecessors in the White House. Those predecessors discounted national interests in favor of global integration. They concluded deals that required more from America's soldiers and workers than from the soldiers and workers of other countries. They gave away too much and Trump is set about to right the balance.

On the other hand, Trump is not withdrawing from Asia. He is a realist and seeks to preserve the strategic status quo in Asia. That means nurturing the alliances with Japan and South Korea (and in the wider region with India and Australia), selling F-16 fighters to Taiwan (which he authorized in summer 2019), and encouraging China not to disrupt the status quo on the Korean peninsula or in global markets.

Thus, Trump's first move in Asia was to thwart North Korea's attempt to change the status quo by acquiring nuclear and missile capabilities that threatened South Korea, Japan, and eventually the American west coast. He rattled the cage of Kim Jung Un by maneuvering US naval forces along the peninsula and threatening fire and fury if "little rocket man" dared to light the fuse. Here again, he used force like a nationalist, blustering from strength ("my button is bigger than yours") but careful not to get America drawn into another distant war. He reinforced the alliance with South Korea and coaxed Seoul to complete the deployment of theater missile defenses. He then cultivated an unprecedented, not to say unorthodox, *pas de deux* with Kim Jung Un, respecting South Korea's right to play a lead role in this duet and urging China not to let Pyongyang endanger wider global stability. Talks resumed, an achievement in itself, but previous patterns of posturing persist.

Potentially, in this complicated balancing act, Trump may do some harm to the alliances, especially if he restricts alliance activities such as training exercises before obtaining firm and enforceable commitments from North Korea to denuclearize. South Korea pushes in this direction because, as a homeland matter, it values reconciliation with the North more highly than any other country. South Korea also tempts fate by repeatedly raising emotional issues that alienate Japan. Japan occupied South Korea; South Korea never occupied Japan. Japan should accept responsibility for that history, and South Korea should finally let that history go, the way France and Germany did in Europe. Korea cannot be stably reunited if it alienates China, and it cannot remain democratic

if it alienates Japan and the United States. In Asia, Trump confronts the limits of a nationalism that is not moderated by overlapping democratic values.

On balance, Trump's alliance policies appear rooted in the nationalist premise that every country must pay for its own defense and in the realist objective that the United States and its allies must defend the status quo in both Europe and Asia, a status quo that reflects the broad advances of democracy since the end of World War II. Except on occasion, as in his speech in Poland in 2017 (Trump 2017d), Trump does not talk much about the values of democracy and freedom. Nor does he pay homage to the multilateral institutions of the postwar liberal order. It might be better (I would prefer it, as a conservative internationalist, see Nau 2013) if he acknowledged that the spread of democracy and multilateral institutions after World War II created a far more comfortable political world for the United States than existed before. While there may be no need to expand that world at this stage, its existence makes US and alliance burdens much less onerous. But Trump, like Obama, has been inoculated by the Iraq and Afghanistan wars to steer clear of foreign military interventions particularly for the gauzy aim of promoting democracy. The American people have voted now in the last three presidential elections for less involvement abroad. And Trump is campaigning in a fourth to maintain that stance.

### *Middle East and Terrorism*

In the Middle East, Trump's strategy is already more nationalist than realist. There are no broad alliances of democracies to defend and balancing power, Trump believes, is largely a local affair not requiring the permanent placement of large US troops in the region. America remains ready to intervene from offshore, as it did against ISIS, but the nationalist objective then is to demolish the adversary and get back out. The question is whether Israel and a ragtag group of Arab allies, led by Saudi Arabia, will suffice to hold the line against Syria, Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

Obama based his strategy in the Middle East on accommodating Iran's regional power ambitions, asking the Saudis to share the region with the Iranians, and anticipating that Iran would moderate its support of terrorism in the region if the western powers and Iran came to terms on Iran's nuclear program (Kaufman 2016; Nau 2015). By contrast, Trump pushed back against Iranian hegemony. Arguing that the nuclear



agreement did little to moderate Iranian behavior, he withdrew from the agreement and reimposed maximum sanctions on Teheran (Thiessen 2019). He then sought to piece together a coalition of local Arab powers to defeat ISIS, hold ground in eastern Syria where ISIS might reemerge, and prevent Iran from building land bridges (they already ship thousands of missiles by air) to supply extremist groups in southeastern Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza preparing for another war with Israel. The objective was to construct a local balance of power to deter terrorists and support Israel without deploying large numbers of American troops.

Trump's first foreign visit was to Riyadh, where he urged the Crown Prince to stop private Saudi funding of jihadists and work with other Arab countries principally the United Arab Emirates to control territory seized from ISIS. He rejected pressures to break with the Saudi regime over its involvement in the murder of a Saudi journalist, a move consistent with nationalist rather than internationalist logic, and resisted military pressures to put more US boots on the ground in Syria. He talked tough with Iran and coordinated with Great Britain to protect commercial shipping. But he did not retaliate when Iran shot down a sophisticated US military surveillance drone in the Strait of Hormuz. He negotiates with Turkey to untangle complicated relationships among terrorists, Kurdish forces, and Syrian militia on Turkey's border with Syria and Iraq. And he maintains efforts to "deconflict" incidents between US and Russian forces in southeastern Syria. Most importantly, he reaffirms support for Israel, his second stop after Riyadh in 2017, a relationship that Obama had significantly weakened. In summer 2019 he unveiled a Palestinian peace plan, focusing on economic development in the region, a nonstarter in the current environment dismissed instantly by Palestinian officials as an attempt at economic "bribery."

The strategy involves the sporadic use of force to display resolve and defeat terrorists. Trump bombed Syria twice to protest chemical weapons violations (which nevertheless continue). And he removed military restrictions imposed by Obama (for example, directly arming the YPG, a splinter Kurdish group that seeks independence from Turkey) and quickly cleaned out the remaining ISIS forces in Syria and Iraq that at one point occupied territory equal to that of Belgium. No small accomplishment, the victory over ISIS now sets the stage for the more serious challenge—keeping terrorism at bay, counterbalancing Iran, working with weak and divided Arab states in the region, and remaining a stalwart supporter of Israel, all

without putting large numbers of US troops on the ground again in the fashion of Iraq and Afghanistan (McGurk 2019).

The terrorist problems in Iraq and Afghanistan remain unresolved. Iran exerts undue influence in Iraqi affairs through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Shiite militia in southern Iraq. The IRGC coordinates terrorist missile attacks against Israel in the Golan Heights. The Taliban and terrorist groups on the Pakistani border wage a seemingly endless war against the internationally supported government in Kabul and control roughly a third to one-half of the Afghan countryside. Peace talks between the United States, Taliban, and Kabul negotiators flash on and off. The focus is clearly counterterrorism not nation-building. The United States anticipates withdrawing most if not all of US and NATO forces in return for Taliban commitments to keep terrorists from training again to attack America or its allies. Trump hopes that the threat of offshore intervention will be enough to deter the Taliban.

In sum, Trump's policy in the Middle East already aims for an offshore balancing strategy. While US troops remain forward deployed in Europe and Asia, Trump is drawing them down, and perhaps out, in the Middle East. Small numbers may remain to facilitate intelligence and rapid reentry if necessary. But no trip wire alliance arrangements are likely; and Israel, the only mature democracy in the region, is capable of putting up a formidable defense on its own without direct support of American forces. The strategy may not work, but Trump should be given some credit for trying an alternative because Obama's strategy was not working either.

### *Trade and Immigration*

Trump's nationalist tendencies are perhaps most unguarded in trade and immigration areas. He entertains mercantilist views that trade surpluses are good (China is winning) and trade deficits are bad (the United States is losing). He strongly prefers bilateral to multilateral agreements. And he is willing to deploy tariffs not only as leverage in trade negotiations but also to influence broader strategic objectives, such as Mexican cooperation on immigration.

For Trump, trade and immigration flows signal the worst effects of a globalization process spun out of control. The admission of China to the World Trade Organization was the major disrupter in trade. In the late-1990s China sent a negligible share of its exports to the United States. By 2018, it exported \$540 billion or 20% of its exports to

the United States (United States Census Bureau 2019). This dramatic and sudden escalation of China's presence in US and global markets rattled US labor markets and created the impression if not reality that China was overtaking the United States. When the Cold War ended in 1991, Japan was declared the winner because it exploited global markets without contributing much to western defense. When the financial crisis hit in 2008, China was declared the winner because it manipulated its currency and flooded US and global markets with its products, many of them produced by technology stolen from western firms. China's statist economy seemed to prosper while the global capitalist system floundered.

Add to these economic changes the advent of global terrorism and the shock of 9/11. The American people, already reeling under the onslaught of Chinese and other global exports, were called upon to fight two distant wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. They got little help from their allies. Indeed, France and Germany bitterly opposed the Iraq war and provided little more than token support to rebuild these war-torn countries. A bitterness mounted among the American public, resenting ungrateful allies and scorning an American establishment that dismissed their concerns as deplorable, xenophobic, or worse.

Trump was more in tune with these popular sentiments than anyone else. He summarized it well in his Inaugural Address: "For many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry, subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing the sad depletion of our military. We've defended other nations' borders while refusing to defend our own. And spent trillions and trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair" (Trump 2017a).

He acted early to reverse these perceived injustices. He unleashed a cannonade of tariff wars and bilateral negotiations with America's trading partners. By 2019 he successfully renegotiated the United States-South Korean Free Trade Agreement and replaced the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the USMCA. By most accounts, both of these agreements are helpful updates of their predecessors (Whiting and Beaumont-Smith 2019). The USMCA improves the prospects of labor gains for the United States, particularly in the auto sector, requiring 75% of a product's components to be produced inside the three countries to qualify for zero tariffs, while improving US access to dairy markets in Canada and strengthening labor laws in Mexico. Both agreements have been ratified by Congress, and important tariff negotiations with Japan,

the European Union, the United Kingdom (after it officially leaves the EU), and China remain outstanding.

The China trade talks are the most critical. China's global firms are state-owned. Mining, shipping, and construction companies that backstop the Belt and Road Initiative—a trillion dollar plus Chinese government project to construct new land and sea highways between Chinese and global markets—make mega-billion dollar deals with foreign countries. If those deals go sour, China seizes the assets. In 2017 Sri Lanka handed over a commercial port to China which might now be used as a Chinese naval base (Reuters 2017). Giant telecommunications companies such as Huawei not only require foreign partners to give them their technology as the price for entering the Chinese market, they also sell products in global markets that then provide backdoor access for Chinese intelligence and military surveillance. Trump has decided that these links between Chinese firms and the Chinese government must become distinct and transparent or China's role in global markets must be curtailed. He has almost unanimous support for this approach both in Congress and among foreign allies. Thus, he has ratcheted up tariffs as high as 25% on half and potentially all of the Chinese goods. The United States has also placed high tech Chinese firms on so-called entity lists requiring them to apply for licenses to ship products to the United States. China has retaliated with tariffs and entity lists of its own.

Where do such tariff wars lead? Some analysts conclude that China will not give up meaningful government control of its key industries; others like Trump believe it might if the Chinese economy falters. A Phase I agreement was reached in early 2020. Then the covid-19 pandemic hit. Now the crunch point comes when and how the pandemic and current business cycle ends. Can China, whose economy is sagging, avoid or survive a prolonged global downturn? Can Trump survive both a pandemic and market crisis in the November 2020 elections? If the West hangs tough on the China challenge, western markets are likely to prove more robust than Chinese markets. Trump's instincts here are sound. At the G-7 summit in 2018 he challenged the allies not to raise tariffs but to reduce them to zero. Perhaps a bluff, the challenge nevertheless reveals a desire to disarm rather than rearm trade relations, similar to Ronald Reagan's approach to military armaments—build them up (NATO deployment of INF missiles in 1983) in order to build them down (US-Soviet INF Treaty in 1987 which reduced INF missiles to

zero). Nor is it evident that he spurns in practice multilateral agreements. Of the two major trade agreements he has concluded thus far, the most significant one, the USMCA, is multilateral.

From 1965 to 2015 the United States absorbed 59 million immigrants, legal and illegal (Pew Research Center 2015). In 2019, despite Trump's crackdown, immigrant flows were on track to top 2 million legal and illegal immigrants (Olson 2019). With ISIS on the run in Syria, refugees swelled in Europe and, through central America, on the US–Mexican border. Trump won the presidency with the promise to squelch illegal immigration and reform the legal immigration system. He made the construction of a wall on the US–Mexican border a signature issue of his presidency.

Trump attacks immigration as a nationalist. “A nation without borders,” he argues, “is not a nation at all” (Trump 2019). A border wall therefore is emblematic of nationhood. Most of the illegal immigrants do not come in over the border, of course. They come in through expired visas and chain migration of family members. Thus, while Trump touts the wall, he aggressively deports illegal immigrants and reduces as well as reforms legal immigration. Despite vitriolic domestic divisions, Trump may be making progress. He convinced Mexico, under threat of tariffs, to tighten control of its southern border with Guatemala. Caravan traffic and border crossings went down (Olson 2019), and immigration authorities accelerated deportation arrests.

### *Human Rights and Developing Countries*

Trump is not much interested in the developing world. In general, he takes a strong nationalist view that countries should take care of themselves, fist and foremost. If they succeed, they can join the community of responsible nations; if they don't, they can languish in troubles of their own making. Foreign aid is not going to matter much, either way.

Trump exhibits few internationalist instincts, either liberal or conservative. He hails the United Nations but as a community of independent nations not as a design for collective decision-making or common values. He tells the General Assembly: “We do not expect diverse countries to share the same cultures, traditions, or even systems of government. But we do expect all nations to uphold these two core sovereign duties: to respect the interests of their own people and the rights of every other sovereign nation. This is the beautiful vision of this institution, and this is

foundation for cooperation and success.” “Strong, sovereign nations,” he adds, “let diverse countries with different values, different cultures, and different dreams not just coexist, but work side by side on the basis of mutual respect” (Trump 2017b). There is no pressure to push human rights or democracy.

Trump believes the United States went off track after the Cold War when it promoted democracy instead of stability. Talking at the Center for the National Interest (CNI) in April 2016, he said: “It all began with the dangerous idea that we could make Western democracies out of countries that had no experience or interest in becoming a Western Democracy.” “We are getting out of the nation-building business,” he reported, “and instead focusing on creating stability in the world” (Trump 2016a). When Trump talks about values, he does not consider them universal. Rather values are embedded in civilizations. In the same speech at CNI he said: “Instead of trying to spread ‘universal values’ that not everyone shares, we should understand that strengthening and promoting Western civilization and its accomplishments will do more to inspire positive reforms around the world than military interventions.” Then he echoed the famous nationalist dictum of John Quincy Adams: The world must know that “we go not abroad in search of monsters to destroy...”

In this respect, Trump reflects the nationalist creed of Teddy Roosevelt. Civilization is not one world but a variety of cultures that separates civilized peoples from barbarians. Today the barbarians are the radical Islamists. In Saudi Arabia, he said: “above all we must be united in pursuing the one goal that transcends every other consideration. That goal is to meet history’s great test—to conquer extremism and vanquish the forces of terrorism.” In Riyadh he endorsed the opening of “a new Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology” which “represents a clear declaration that Muslim-majority countries must take the lead in combatting radicalization.” Muslim countries, he said, cannot wait for American power to crush this enemy for them: “The nations of The Middle East will have to decide what kind of future they want for themselves, for their countries, and for their children. It is a choice between two futures – and it is a choice America CANNOT (sic) make for you. A better future is only possible if your nations drive out the terrorists and extremists” (Trump 2017c).

## CONCLUSION

Trump has been called a transactional president, interested in the deal and not the design or the destination of diplomacy. If that's the case, however, his transactions still represent one consistent premise, namely self-interest. In his business deals, it was all about the company's interest; and in his diplomatic deals, it is all about the national interest. Self-interest is without question a nationalist premise. America must take care of itself as all countries are obligated to do. If they don't, they cannot continue to expect others to defend them. A nation that does not take care of itself is not worthy of being taken care of by others. The first prerequisite of foreign or domestic policy, therefore, is national independence and strength. Trump puts the revival and vitality of the American economy first. It remains the bedrock of his nationalist orientation.

Trump builds on that nationalism to accept the world bequeathed to him by his predecessors. While he rants against globalization, he makes business deals (before he became president) in a global capitalist market and diplomatic deals (now that he is president) in a largely democratic world. Both contexts are significant. They constitute a world far different from 1945 that Trump is ready to defend. So far, this realist instinct keeps him engaged in the world. If he succeeds in rebalancing trade and security commitments, his nationalist/realist policies might offer a valuable course correction and sustain globalization far into the future. Better balanced trade may expand markets, as the new USMCA and China Phase I trade deals suggest. And more balanced alliances may target and safeguard the prospects for freedom where it counts the most, in Ukraine and on the Korean peninsula.

In the meantime, there are no guarantees, especially with Trump. He might become more nationalist and less realist. If allies in Europe and Asia do not step up and share greater leadership and burdens, he may bring American forces home. Realist pundits, who are now more nationalist than realist (because realists traditionally favored forward defense), increasingly advocate such withdrawal (Mearsheimer 2018; Walt 2018a; for my review of these books, see Nau 2019). Trade disputes may also push him in the nationalist direction. If balanced trade means less trade, the Cold War legacy of free trade may be at risk. And if US forces pull back to the western hemisphere and China and Russia succeed in undermining the confidence of democratic societies on their borders, the Cold War legacy of democracy may wither. The jungle of illiberal nationalism

that ravaged Europe in the early twentieth century may grow back (Kagan 2018).

To avoid this outcome, however, as much depends on what the allies do as what the United States does. The allies today are powerful and wealthy democracies. Germany and Japan have had 75 years to recover from the traumas of World War II. They are no longer semi-sovereign because they are untrustworthy in military affairs or middle powers because they have only regional not global interests. They are world powers and democratic states. They have to decide if they want to face the future with or without the United States. Does it matter to them whether their partners are democratic or not? Can open societies live next door to autocratic ones, as Europe and Japan do but the United States does not, without being divided and contaminated by authoritarian undercurrents? The allies have to decide: is Russian aggression in Ukraine and Chinese assertiveness in the Pacific a bigger threat to stability and values in their neighborhood than a more petulant and parsimonious American ally?

For the moment internationalists (like me) are on the sidelines. Too many of them are angry and blame Trump for destroying the liberal world order. They should take a deep breath and enjoy a victory lap instead. They can take credit for the unprecedented spread of democracy and markets after World War II (Nau 2011). And they should exhibit more faith in the durability of their legacy. They are wrong to see any effort to slow down and recalibrate globalization as an attack on free trade and the democratic peace. The political orientation of the world remains remarkably favorable from the point of view of democratic countries. And internationalists are also wrong to identify populism with illiberalism. The populist movement in Europe, Asia, and the United States is not antidemocratic (Mead 2017). It is in fact a democratic check on cosmopolitan elites at home and in international institutions who value their own expertise more than their accountability to democratic nations. It is stunning that after seventy-five years, not one international institution elects its top officials. That includes the European Union. Why doesn't it occur to cosmopolitan elites that this may be the principal threat to the liberal order, not populist parties pushing back against exploding trade and immigration?

Trump is hard to decipher and his bombastic style makes it even harder (Hanson 2019; Laderman and Simms 2017). But on the basis of what he represents and does, he is acting not only in an understandable way but a way that may salvage the liberal international order and conserve



the democratic peace for decades to come. Instead of acting outside the foreign policy traditions of the United States, he is counterbalancing an internationalist tradition that became a bit too obsessed with its own success. He is reasserting a more nationalist and realist tradition that potentially conserves the world of free nations to advance the cause of freedom again at a later time.

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