

# Donald Trump and the Emergent Dominant Narrative in US Foreign Policy

Written by Jack Thompson

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/02/04/donald-trump-and-the-emergent-dominant-narrative-in-us-foreign-policy/>

JACK THOMPSON, FEB 4 2017

It is difficult to find experts that approve of President Donald Trump's emergent foreign policy. Neoconservatives and internationalists complain that, by abandoning the leading role the United States has taken in world affairs since the end of World War Two, he is contributing to the collapse of the liberal world order and the emergence of a more dangerous, Hobbesian alternative. Libertarians and economists worry that he is risking a global depression with his protectionist policies. National security hawks argue that his anti-Muslim rhetoric could bolster ISIS; and regional specialists warn that he is wrecking relationships with key partners such as Europe, China, and Mexico.

To a considerable extent, Trump's detractors are correct. His assessment of the prevailing state of affairs—that a corrupt, globalist political establishment has allowed other countries to take advantage of the US and that the best way to remedy this is to put 'America First' by reducing imports and extracting substantial concessions from allies and international institutions—is as simplistic as it is delusional. Whatever one thinks of US foreign policy, a belligerent, neomercantilist, unilateralist approach would be destabilizing overseas and would only exacerbate the problems confronting the country at home.

At the same time, critics are neglecting some key implications of Trump's rhetoric. One is that he is untroubled that the concept of America First—which is in some ways an updated version of the old doctrine of unilateralism—has been excoriated by the foreign policy establishment. Quite the opposite—he wears the disdain of elites as a badge of honor. By promising to build a wall on the border with Mexico, to prevent the immigration of Muslims, to crack down on what he calls China's unfair trade practices, to make America's allies pay more for their own defense, and to 'bomb the shit out of ISIS', Trump is appealing to a different audience: his core supporters. These voters are culturally conservative, angry about the side effects of globalization, worried that the country is in decline, and skeptical about the value of international engagement but also concerned about terrorism. Trump's message is music to their ears, especially since they feel, with good reason, as if political elites in both parties have ignored their concerns.

In other words, if we shift our focus from the effectiveness of his policies abroad to the impact they are having on his political base, the president's statecraft begins to make more sense. In a nutshell, it isn't primarily about foreign policy—it's about domestic politics. And, in spite of the fact that Trump's overall approval rating has plummeted, from an already low level, initial indications are that Trump's hardcore supporters are mostly pleased with his performance. They *like* the fact that he is following through on his radical campaign promises instead of normalizing. In addition, aside from some isolated figures in the party such as Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, there has been little meaningful criticism from elected Republicans. Instead, he has received statements of support from key figures such as Speaker of the House Paul Ryan.

This underscores a second fact that has been overlooked. Trump is laying the groundwork for a fundamental shift in the way that Americans think and talk about foreign and national security policy. In order to understand how, we need to consider the importance of narratives. In his timely book, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National Security*, Ronald R. Krebs observes that policymakers must seek public approval for major initiatives. In doing so, he contends, they necessarily engage in a contest over the meaning of significant international events. This is where

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narrative becomes relevant. Dominant narratives—such as the Cold War consensus or the George W. Bush administration's War on Terror—allow us to impose a semblance of order and meaning upon the infinitely complex and confusing world around us. In doing so, they set the boundaries within which events are debated and understood and shape the policymaking process. According to Krebs, dominant narratives emerge only when the right set of factors is present. This occurs when the narrative is propagated by an authoritative speaker, usually the president; when it is told in the form of a story, which provides the audience with a readily understood explanation of events; and when there is no longer a regnant narrative, providing an opening for a new one to arise.

This is precisely the state of affairs in the United States today. Trump is offering a consistent (if misleading) explanation about the source of the struggles which confront so many Americans. This alternative narrative is being proffered at a time when the longstanding, bipartisan consensus about the best strategy for keeping the nation safe and the economy growing—pursuing an internationalist economic and national security policy—is being questioned by a large portion of the public. As the influential neoconservative Robert Kagan laments, 'a majority of Americans have signaled their unwillingness to continue upholding the world order'.

There is little doubt that America First is a disaster in the making. But this probably won't stop Trump, at least not any time soon, because dominant narratives need not make for good policy. After all, Bush's War on Terror set the stage for a ruinous set of decisions from which the nation still has not recovered, but it was wildly popular in the short term and held sway just long enough to help him win a second term in 2004.

At this point, Trump appears to be on a similar trajectory. The question is not whether America First will displace the previous dominant narrative. To an extent, it already has, as internationalism in the GOP is in rapid retreat (in spite of a few exceptions such as McCain and Graham) and Democrats are responding to Trump's agenda, rather than setting their own. The question is, how long will America First persist and what will be its consequences? If Trump manages to do all that he has suggested and implied—weakening NATO and turning a blind eye to Russian revanchism in Eastern Europe, overturning the international trade regime, instigating a potentially catastrophic confrontation with China, and treating the conflict with ISIS as a mortal struggle between Christian and Muslim civilizations—the world will be a very different, and much scarier, place when he leaves office.

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## About the author:

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