

Trump's Foreign Policy Mantra: 'Whoever Pays For It!'

Written by Mohsen Solhdoost

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/07/24/trumps-foreign-policy-mantra-whoever-pays-for-it/>

MOHSEN SOLHDOOST, JUL 24 2018

President Trump's unorthodox views of U.S. foreign policy never cease to puzzle scholars of international relations and foreign policy experts. The American President's barrage of criticisms of the U.S. NATO allies and his constant attacks on the U.S. trade partners has made it difficult for both liberal thinkers and realist analysts (among others) to make sense of his foreign policy. Key strands of Trump's specific vision to make foreign policy have been fundamentally undermining the American-led liberal world order. Below, I discuss how Trump has precipitated such a change by reducing U.S. foreign policy to a series of transactional relations. First, I briefly examine the conventional wisdom vs. Trump's understanding of America's role in international affairs. Then, I look into the dynamics of the relationships between the U.S. and its NATO and European allies, economic rivals such as China, and others such as Saudi Arabia to see how Trump's modus operandi in foreign relations has had implications for the liberal world order.

Conventional Wisdom vs. Trump's 'America First'

The post-World War II international order has been dominated by liberal principles. The United States and its partners in Western Europe pursued ordering mechanisms to build and develop a multifaceted international order around economic openness, security cooperation, and political/democratic solidarity. The U.S., the first citizen of this order, has both provided hegemonic leadership and adjusted its own foreign policy behaviour to promote each of these suborders. Yet, President Trump's perception of the role of the U.S. in the international community has undermined the existing liberal world order.

"As President of the United States, I will always put America first", said Trump in his first address to the United Nations General Assembly in 2017 (2017). So far, the manner in which President Trump and his cabinet seem to perceive the U.S. role in international affairs has been best defined by some White House officials' comments (Goldberg, 2018): 'We're America, Bitch!' Be it due to his impatience with the status quo, like his unilateral decision to recognize Jerusalem (Brattberg and Kimmage, 2018), or simply his tendency to act on his own impulses, like his tweet warning Russia in advance about American missiles going to hit Syrian government targets (Parker et al., 2018), President Trump has been reorienting U.S. foreign policy.

Trump's course of foreign policy is a significant departure from the attitudes- such as the U.S. commitment to security alliance with NATO countries and economic partnership with European states -with which the U.S. has been often identified in the post-Cold War era. Perhaps, Mr Trump's boastful campaign hype about his reputation as 'the ultimate dealmaker' (Lazaroff, 2016) provides the best frame of reference to now explain his foreign policy. For President Trump, there are no international partners; all other states are only economic rivals and opponents who are supposed to agree to a host of sweeping trade concessions. In simple terms, by seeking purely transactional relations with the U.S. long-standing alliance partners and its adversaries alike, Donald Trump is in fact selling the U.S. foreign policy to the highest bidder. Yet reducing the American foreign policy to a series of business transactions has a broad range of political implications, the most important of which is the undermining of the liberal world order.

U.S. Trade & Security ties with Liberal Allies

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To better understand the consequences of the current U.S. foreign policy, it is essential to examine how the dynamics of the U.S.'s relationships with its allies, rivals, and adversaries have changed since President Trump took office. Foreign policy experts highlight the loss of credibility with Canada and Europe as a collateral damage to the U.S. leadership of the free world (Burns, 2018). The U.S. relations with some of its most critical allies such as NATO members have come under serious strain since President Trump began to berate U.S. long-standing partners for 'underpayments' and 'arrears for years of lagging contribution' (White, 2018, Herszenhorn, 2017). Attitudes of trashing NATO as obsolete (Ward, 2017) and declining to confirm the U.S. commitment to Article 5 of the treaty temporarily dissipated when President Trump was assured that 'money is beginning to pour in' (Politico, 2017) from alliance partners. Yet, in the wake of the recent NATO summit, Trump once again doubled down on his criticism of U.S. allies by calling Germany a 'captive' of Russia (Review, 2018) and arguing that Brexit would "probably kill any future deal" between the U.S. and U.K. (BBC, 2018).

Pursuing such foreign policy has adversely impacted the status of the once leader of the free world. Global confidence in the U.S. leadership has fallen to %30, the lowest level Gallup has ever recorded since a decade ago (Borger, 2018). This new poll, in which participants were asked to rate the U.S., German, and Russian leadership in 134 countries or areas, confirms the deep concerns of foreign policy analysts that Trump's 'America First' approach (Mataconis, 2018), combined with his unrestrained will to bully other states into trade concessions, is not only driving a wedge between the U.S. and its traditional allies, but also causing irreparable damage to the global hegemonic status of the U.S. throughout the world. Such foreign policy has also pitched Washington against what amounts to a range of new and much stronger body of opponents: Canada-Mexico-European Union-China-Russia.

Alienating the U.S. allies has been exacerbated by unprecedented trade decisions. Obsessed with financial earnings, President Trump argued that the U.S. has been taken advantage of in trade deals for decades (CBS, 2018). With a view to ending 'unfair trade deals', the U.S. president imposed new tariffs on steel and aluminium imports from EU, Canada, and Mexico (AP/Reuters, 2018). Once confronted by G7 leaders at this year's June summit, President Trump escalated the arguments into a full-blown trade war unleashing a tirade against the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau (Australian, 2018). Repeatedly citing Canada and Canadian steel and aluminium as a national security threat to the U.S. (Jacobs, 2018) and insisting that Mexico should pay for the U.S. President's proposed border wall (Kim and Gearan, 2018), has provoked outrage from both of the two neighbouring countries. Financial concerns previously also constituted the American President's decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement with blatant disregard for the European allies' request to remain committed (Volcovici, 2017). As a result, the 'America First' trade policies have not only widened the rift between normally friendly trading partners, but also have raised serious political concerns amongst U.S.'s strategic allies with whom U.S. has already won two World Wars plus a Cold War in the past century (Leonhardt, 2018). Being pushed to the brink of an all-out trade war, the EU, Canada, and Mexico have imposed retaliatory tariffs on imports from the U.S. (Boffey, 2018). Such souring of relations between the U.S. leader and other leaders of richest liberal democracies has sparked concerns over imminent collapse of the liberal world order. As the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, stated, such self-serving posturing, an otherwise abandoning of alliances and free trade is likely to be 'the first symptoms of the breakup of the Western political community' (2018).

Israel, The Only Privileged Ally

Israel is the only U.S. ally which was not only privileged from wrath of Trump, but also enjoyed renewed warmth in its relationship with the U.S. leadership. Trump's deviation from the cautious course of U.S. foreign policy towards Israel and its intractable conflict with Palestine could be also explained in transactional contexts. Yet, influencing the current U.S. foreign policy through financial dealings is a real disaster particularly when the Trumps' financial interests overshadow U.S. national interest. Surprisingly, no other state more than Israel, the strongest U.S. ally in the Middle East, has, so far, exploited the business interests of the Trumps (and the Kushners), their financial headaches and lack of diplomatic experience in order to cultivate the American Middle East policy on Israel's terms. In much the same way Trump has dealt with other foreign policy issues, the controversial decisions to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and to withdraw from the Iran deal were backed by a series of financial transactions between the Trumps (and the Kushners) and some Israeli connections. The most important of all were the two billionaires of the Likudist Republican Jewish Coalition, Sheldon Adelson and Bernard Marcus, who contributed over \$40 million in outside

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spending to elect Trump in return for his pledge to rip up the Iran deal (Clifton, 2018), and to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital by relocating the U.S. embassy there (Underwood, 2018). By following through these campaign promises, the Trumps and the Kushners have continued to gain personal benefits from Israeli sources. To name but a few, the Kushners have received \$30 million investment from Menora Mivtachim (Drucker, 2018), partnered with Raz Steinmetz in purchasing \$190 million worth of apartment buildings in Manhattan (Maltz, 2018), and have received at least four loans from Bank Hapoalim (Rochvarger, 2017), Israel's largest bank.

President Trump's choice of a bankruptcy lawyer, a staunch backer of West Bank settlements, with zero diplomatic experience for ambassador to Israel (Jones and Lee, 2016) also shows that money is the primary metric in Trump's foreign policy-making. David Friedman, Trump's pick for Israel envoy, has a long history of close relationships with the Trumps and the Kushners. The strong financial bonds between the U.S. President, his son-in-law and Ambassador Friedman have given him carte blanche to steer the American policies in Israel in as much as it has reinforced Israel's lobbying in Washington. The issue has come to a head as the U.S. Ambassador has not only sidestepped traditional diplomatic channels, but also has questioned the U.S. intelligence assessments, and dismissed new State Department vetting procedures for enhancing scrutiny of military aid to Israel (Toosi, 2018).

Trump's economic attachment to Israel is perhaps the most controversial part of the American President's foreign policy as it has largely damaged liberal principles both at home and abroad. The current path of the U.S. Middle East policy has been undertaken by Trump against the advice of the top U.S. Army General, Joseph Votel (Ali, 2018), Trump's first Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson (Sevastopulo, 2017), Trump's Secretary of Defense, James Mattis (Mitchell, 2018), even some Republican Senators such as Jeff Flake (Carney, 2018), and Washington's three most important European allies (U.K., France, & Germany) (Mitchell, 2018) who have unanimously argued that Iran deal was in the U.S. national interest as well as that of the international community.

Tilting Towards Authoritarian Regimes

The other controversial move that has blown the liberal world order off course is President Trump's money-oriented foreign policy posturing in favour of some authoritarian partners as opposed to America's liberal allies. The situation in the Middle East, where the U.S. foreign policy is driven by the Trump Organization (including the Kushner family real estate empire) rather than by the Trump's administration (Bunch, 2018), is much worse than what Trump inherited from Obama. Trump's son in law, Jared Kushner, who's in charge of Trump's Middle East portfolio, has effectively aligned U.S. foreign policy with the political agenda of countries that have business to offer (Solhdoost, 2018). Take Saudi Arabia, for example. Riyadh, as the first capital visited by President Trump on his first international trip, was a business platform on which Trump courted Saudi investment and signed deals worth \$350 billion (Chabkoun, 2017). Trump also openly announced that the U.S. Syria policy would depend on whether Saudi Arabia foots the bill for a continued American military presence in Syria (MEE, 2018).

In return for economic profits for Trump's team in the Middle East, regional investors including Russia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Israel have benefited politically from the Trumps and the Kushners more than the entitled beneficiaries, the American people. The political breakthroughs for these states were preceded by huge financial contributions to Trump's campaign before the Presidential election in the U.S. in 2016. Saudi Arabia and UAE initiated the business talks with Jared Kushner and Michael Flynn through their intermediary, George Nader, in 2016 (Mazzetti et al., 2018). Nader's approach to Trump's team led to Trump's key fundraiser, Elliot Brody, winning deals worth \$200 million for his private business in UAE. Since then, Trump has been siding with the two Arab monarchies not only against his own cabinet secretaries, but also against his financial counterparts' regional nemeses, Qatar and Iran (Kirkpatrick and Mazzetti, 2018). When Trump threw his backing behind the Saudi blockade on Qatar, home to the U.S. military central command and 10,000 American troops, it became clear that geopolitical and strategic concerns take no priority over financial matters for the American President's foreign policy thinking (Solhdoost, 2017). Yet, Qataris quickly learned that perhaps, the only way to regain their footing with the current U.S. administration is to give in to the pressure to pay more. So, Qatar made a decision to bail out Kushner's 666 Fifth Ave (Bagli and Drucker, 2018), continue to buy \$12 billion worth of the U.S. weaponry, and upgrade and pay for the maintenance cost of the U.S. airbase in Qatar (Swaine and Borger, 2018). If the U.S. foreign policy was undergirded by universal values and alliances with liberal democracies prior to Trump's presidency, today U.S. foreign policy,

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particularly in the Middle East, is steered at the helm of authoritarian monarchies with gross and systematic violations of human rights.

Treating Allies and Adversaries Alike

Trump has enacted the same foreign policy behaviour with regards to the Korean peninsula. His attitude towards China, North Korea and the U.S.'s regional allies, Japan and South Korea, is also predominantly shaped by money. China has frequently helped President Trump gain personal profits in exchange for a direct shift in U.S. policy. For example, Trump's phone conversation with the Taiwanese President on the phone, following his private business representative's visit to the island for exploring expansion of Trump's business, caused an early foreign policy conundrum in 2016. Yet the American President's initial breach of decades of U.S. foreign policy and protocol regarding 'One China' policy was immediately reversed when China granted approval for 39 Trump trademarks (Kenney and Norris, 2017).

The reach of Chinese influence and money is also extended to \$950 million loan Trump received from the state-owned bank of China in 2012 (Kenney and Norris, 2017). Trump is also personally profiting from China's \$500 million investment in an Indonesian theme park in addition to another \$500 million loan from Chinese banks (Date, 2018). Yet China has skilfully leveraged such financial contributions in reorienting American policy towards North Korea. China significantly undercut the American President's 'maximum pressure' campaign on North Korea (Sherman and Revere, 2018). It is, perhaps, too naïve to believe that Trump suddenly decided to drop his threats of a nuclear pre-emptive attack on North Korea and instead prepared for a one-on-one meeting with the North Korean dictator free from the Chinese pressure (Glaser and Mastro, 2018).

Perhaps, the only difference in treating allies and adversaries is that Trump uses the language of threat bluntly against the latter. This was illustrated by how Trump forced Qatar to pay more in return for a more amicable treatment by the U.S. (Bagli and Drucker, 2018). In another instance, the American President openly stated that the U.S. would defend Japan and South Korea, U.S.'s regional allies, only if they shoulder the costs for a possible military operation against North Korea (CNBC, 2018). President Trump put forward the same argument about the Middle East and asked the 'immensely wealthy' Arab states to pay for their protection by U.S. troops in the region (Herald, 2018). And very recently, President Trump, once again, escalated the trade war with China threatening to levy further tariffs on \$200 billion worth of Chinese products (Lynch and Long, 2018).

Conclusion

The recurrence of such money-oriented themes in the U.S. foreign policy behaviour has undermined the liberal world order in ways that will produce benefit for Trump's family and a few non-liberal, non-Western countries. Trump has openly disdained the tolerance, diplomatic behaviour, mutual respect, and constructive dialogue that are central to a liberal international society. Instead he has replaced such liberal values by extortionate attitudes and economic motives. This has not only alienated key NATO allies and European partners, but also has afforded the opportunity to countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, and China to leverage the White House foreign policy in return for their financial contributions. When the leader of the liberal world order refrains to commit to the core liberal ideals, and consequently the global confidence in the U.S. leadership plunges into the lowest level ever recorded since a decade ago, the dominant world order would face an inevitable decline.

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