

# Crisis or Continuation? The Trump Administration and Liberal Internationalism

Written by Andrew Dryhurst

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Both the United Kingdom's (UK) decision to leave the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States (US) have brought the Liberal Internationalist order (LIO) into crisis. The resurgence of political movements that advocate state-centrism and nationalism and frame international relations as a transaction exemplifies the scepticism felt by the electorates of two of the LIO's key architects towards the post-war liberal consensus that shaped both nations' foreign policies (Ikenberry et. al 2018). The rise of non-Western states as key international players, illiberal non-state actors, fomenting resentment felt towards political elites, and the increase of ethnically-charged social problems domestically are all symptoms of the crisis that the LIO, led by the United States, is facing.

President Trump's foreign policy has undoubtedly thrust the LIO into disarray. Much has been written about whether or not his foreign policy has any strategic coherence, with some believing that US foreign policy is contingent on the mood and narrow-sighted worldview of the President that they argue is a chaotic and incoherent mess (Wolff 2017, Chappell 2017). Others believe him to have a coherent, realist foreign policy (Brooks 2016), whilst others find this to be a ludicrous suggestion (Pillar 2018). Other authors also argue that his foreign policy marks a return to the 19th century (Wright 2016). This lack of consensus clearly highlights the confusion and the proverbial spanner that the Trump administration has thrown into the works. However, whilst all of these arguments undoubtedly possess elements of truth, it is very difficult to ascribe any US administration, never mind one as chaotic as Donald Trump's, with a coherent foreign policy doctrine. The United States' status as the global hegemon of over seventy years means their foreign relations are incredibly complex and wrought with contradictions and conflicting interests. That is to say, there is always going to be some continuity as well as discontinuity with certain aspects of foreign policy, irrespective of ideological differences to presidential predecessors.

Trump's foreign policy does, however, have some distinct components. Firstly, Trump is evidently unhappy with the US' relationship with the LIO and believes they are getting a bad deal. His outspoken criticisms of NATO, Japan, and South Korea show that he is unhappy with existing military alliances. The sparking of trade wars with the European Union (EU) and China show that he feels the US is disadvantaged by the global economy, and it is quite clear that he possesses a significant level of admiration for authoritarian strong men like Vladimir Putin, Rodrigo Duterte, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which he has displayed in an outspoken manner that would have been inconceivable for any of his post-war predecessors. Secondly, Trump's foreign policy can be seen as short-term and transactional, based on the utilization of the US' military and economic might to accumulate small 'victories' (in the eyes of the President). Finally, it is clear from his downsizing of the government and substantial cuts to the State Department that the military, or at least military personnel that Trump finds favourable, are playing a pivotal role in the coordination and implementation of foreign policy.

The objective of this essay is to argue that whilst chaotic and unpredictable, Trump's foreign policy can be understood as an 'offensive realist' foreign policy that is guided by Donald Trump's worldview, or a Trumpian 'offensive realism'. I will use Robert Cox and John Mearsheimer's work to explain why, whilst Trump's foreign policy is not realist in a classical sense, it constitutes a neorealist understanding of foreign policy. I will then examine the implications of this aggressive, 'America first' policy on the LIO. This policy cannot, however, be separated from the

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domestic politics of the United States and it is therefore important to situate this in the context of the Jacksonian campaign that convinced voters to vote for Trump in 2016. I will argue that alongside aligning with a neorealist worldview, the domestic Jacksonian turn legitimizes Trump's foreign policy to large sections of the American electorate and thus comprises a key component of the Administration's foreign policy. The first section of this essay will examine the domestic rise and implications of Jacksonianism to contextually situate the second section of the essay which will focus on Trumpian offensive realism and anecdotally draw from various foreign policy decisions and the 2017 National Defence Strategy. The final section will elaborate on what these decisions mean for the LIO.

## **Trump and Jacksonianism**

Donald Trump's 'America First' policy frames the LIO as a zero-sum game. It argues that the United States' provides a disproportionate amount of money to an international system that should be sustained through multilateral cooperation. As Carla Norrlof writes 'to make "America great again" the United States must "win win win" negotiating more aggressively with other nations, threatening to end agreements and alliances if necessary' (2018). This positivist, transactional attitude towards international relations was perfectly outlined in an interview with the New York Times about his foreign policy where Trump asserted 'we [the US] lose everywhere. We lose monetarily everywhere' (NYT 2016). At a deeper level, such statements are indicative of the Jacksonian ideals upon which Trump ran his campaign. Jacksonians believe in American exceptionalism and a 'singular commitment to the equality and dignity of individual American citizens' (Mead 2017). Transforming the world and spreading American ideals is secondary to the government's domestic concerns. In a situation where the 'liberal elites' are easily framed as the beneficiaries of global economic integration and the LIO, the Trump campaign appealed to the pockets of American society where Jacksonian sentiment is deeply embedded with calls to 'drain the swamp' and the vilification of 'crooked Hilary'. Of course, there are myriad factors that swung the 2016 election and it would be an injustice to characterize Trump's entire voter-base as staunch Jacksonians. However, when we consider that the main drivers of Jacksonian engagement are perceptions of attacks at home – from terrorists, foreigners, and elites, Trump's continuous calls to 'drain the swamp' and constant portrayal of illegal immigration as a threat to American security and values are undoubtedly aimed towards the Jacksonian demographic. Furthermore, because the police and military are seen to be the defenders of US freedom and values, Jacksonian patriotism mandates the unconditional support for these institutions. Trump's 2016 campaign divided the country by simultaneously creating and 'unveiling' a polarizing, 'international and domestic hierarchy that some thought no longer existed' (Mead 2017).

Historically, Trump's inclination towards an 'America First' foreign policy has been well documented. In a 1990 interview with Playboy magazine Trump articulated that if he were the President, his policies would be informed by a distrust of everyone, whether ally or foe, actively support on building a huge military arsenal, and work to bring an end to military agreements wherein America defends nations purely at their expense and for no financial gain (Wright 2016). There is no room in this solipsistic, US-centric worldview for consideration of the financial contributions of allies, the benefits for both military and trade which emerge out of multilateral alliances nor the historical factors that precipitated the emergence of an American-led LIO. Initiatives such as the Marshall Plan, which rebuilt nations perceived to be threatened by Soviet Communism and ushered in an era of production-led global capitalism that ensured the United States became the global economic hegemon, nor the strategic advantages inherent to having military bases all over the world factor in to a Jacksonian worldview, because it dictates that the sole focus of U.S. politics should be at home.

Trump's positions bare striking resemblance to those held by 1940s Republican Senator, Robert Taft. He opposed NATO on the grounds that it was too provocative, and rejected the policy of Containment despite his virulent anti-Communism. However,

unlike Trump, Taft was not outside the mainstream of his time. Many believed America was safe and that it did not matter who ran Europe. Also, unlike Trump, Taft was boring and struggled to break through the noise in several nomination battles (Wright 2016).

However, national security is at the core of Jacksonian politics. Trump's draconian immigration policies are justified by framing immigration as a threat to American civilization and values, as well as national security as seen by his

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recent rebuke of German Chancellor Angela Merkel for the 'naiveté' displayed in her policy of accepting over a million refugees into the country. This utilization of values and national security as a referent point for policy and the pursuit of bilateral relations is therefore more Jacksonian than the isolationism posited by Taft. As Mead points out, 'now [Jacksonian] bitterness is directed primarily against illegal immigration and Islam, which they see as culturally and politically incompatible with their conception of American values' (Mead 2016). Jacksonians have no intention of running a global order, whether in terms of Hamiltonian economism or Wilsonian liberal values. They are realists that adhere to a Hobbesian view of interstate relations, seeing human nature as something inherently corrupt (Jones and Khoo 2017). They have no interest in interfering in other nations' affairs through nation building or democracy, as Trump declared in his inauguration speech, 'we will not impose our way of life on anyone'. This preference for bilateral rather uni- or multilateral trade relations is distinctly different from the attitudes of any of Trump's post-war predecessors.

The influence of Jacksonianism on the US' on-going trade war with the EU and China is something that Paul Pillar describes as less of a feature of a specific foreign policy doctrine than a deliberate move motivated by 'applause lines that get applause due in large part to domestic economic dislocations tinged with xenophobia' (Pillar 2018). Jacksonians valorise honest and strong leaders, and to date Trump is following through on his electoral promises. He left the JCPOA, TTIP, and Paris Climate Agreement, he is adopting a very tough 'America First' stance on international relations and his immigration policies to date have been ruthless and uncompromising. Trump has consolidated the support of his Jacksonian voters and in doing so, has built a strong ideological foundation that compliments his pursuit of an offensive realist foreign policy.

## Trumpian Offensive Realism

In a 2017 article for the *National Interest*, Paul Pillar wrote a passionate rebuttal against any political analysis that described Trump as a 'realist'. For Pillar, Trump's distortion of reality and injection of his factually dubious personal opinions into his foreign policy show realism to be 'the antipodes of Trump's world' (Pillar 2017). Furthermore, the President's neglect of multilateralism and mutually beneficial understandings to advance one's own national interests, as well as his eschewing of democracy and human rights, both components of the real world, caused Pillar to declare that 'it is not clear yet whether Donald Trump's foreign policy has enough coherence to merit the label of any "ism," never mind "realism"' (2017). Whilst there are merits to Pillar's analysis I take issue with the final part of his analysis, namely that Trump's foreign policy does not merit the label of any kind of 'ism'.

Trump's foreign policy is indicative of a sub-category of realist thought known as 'Neo-realism'. Robert Cox describes Neo-realism as a distinctly American product of the Cold War that 'computes the components of power of individual states and assesses the relative chances of moves in the game of power politics' (Cox 1992). A school of thought that is epistemologically positivist, Neo-realism sees 'the world of inter-state relations [as] a given world, identical in its basic structure over time' (Cox 1992). As outlined earlier in the essay, 'America First' is inherently positivist. It understands international relations as a zero-sum game that is navigated through a transactional foreign policy. Trump favours bilateral relationships because the United States enters negotiations safe in the knowledge that they possess both military and economic superiority. That is to say, the odds are in their favour to 'win' in each bilateral agreement. In other words, '[f]or Trump, internationalism is fine if you win, if you're losing, build a wall. This is his art of the deal: to prioritize relative gains in power over absolute gains in security' (Kitchen 2016). Condensing the complexity of global politics into relativism ascribes American foreign policy with an inherent short-term outlook that Paul Pillar believes will foster mistrust and result in the severance of key international ties, ultimately leading to a self-imposed isolationism (Pillar 2018). This prediction, however, is beyond the scope of this essay, which solely seeks to explain the dynamics of Trump's foreign policy rather than speculate about potential outcomes.

In support of my argument for Trumpian Neo-realism, I will analyse a piece that Stephen Walt wrote for *Foreign Policy* (2017) where he argues that the efficacy of political analyses becomes limited when commentators neglect the realities of the balance of power in global politics. Walt's realist understanding asserts that the logic of the balance of power influences the behaviour of all actors in the international arena, irrespective of whether said actors are allies or foes of the nation in question. His argument becomes particularly interesting for the Trump Administration when he states that

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the common US tendency [of assuming] that a state's foreign policy is mostly shaped by its internal characteristics (i.e. its leaders personalities, its political and economic system, or its ruling ideology etc.) [becomes problematic when it does not factor in] its internal circumstances (i.e. the array of threats it faces) (Walt 2017).

It is interesting because Trump's personality and the domestic politics of the US, specifically the Jacksonian base, directly affect the government's perceptions regarding the threats facing the country. That is to say, whilst Walt's realism advocates a thorough analysis of global power politics the unique case of the Trump presidency means that analysis of contemporary US foreign policy, and by default global power politics, cannot be separated from the President's personality and worldview. For example, in a 2016 interview with the *New York Times* about his foreign policy, Trump stated his belief that bilateral agreements provide the US with 'flexibility and speed' (NYT 2016). He framed his transactional approach as necessary because '[y]ou cannot just say that we have a blanket standard all over the world because each instance is totally different' (NYT 2016). The LIO and US hegemony mean that the US plays a role in the power politics of every nation on the planet and their newfound preference for bilateral relations will have serious ramifications for every country across the globe.

Later in the article, Walt provides three points to justify the importance of considering the balance of power in global affairs (2017). He uses NATO as an example to show why shared values are not the most power unifying force in global affairs. The French, German, and Russian United Nations Security Council (UNSC) veto of a bill justifying the 2003 invasion of Iraq shows how nations led by ostensibly different ideologies can unite in the international arena when self-interests are at stake. Finally he makes the argument that, 'focusing on political or ideological affinities and ignoring the role of shared threats encourages us to see adversaries as more unified than they really are' (ibid. 2017). However, whilst I tend to agree with Walt and find these points to be astute and relevant, the internal dynamics of the US, i.e. the Jacksonian turn and Trump's personality, have implications for all of the points described above.

Firstly, Trump's outspoken scepticism towards the post-Cold War relevancy of NATO and his reiteration of his belief that NATO are giving the US a 'bad deal' and exploiting them financially show the influence that leaders' varying perceptions of what exactly it is that constitutes self-interests are extremely relevant to political analyses. With his argument, Walt frames self-interests as a kind of exogenous entity, whereas analysis also needs to consider the endogenous aspects of state interests. The second point about the French, German, and Russian alliance is also relevant, but the US ignored their actions and continued to invade Iraq anyway, catalysing a series of events that shaped the dynamics of contemporary power politics. For example, one could argue the invasion of Iraq greatly threatened both the Iranian and Syrian governments who would end up exploiting the failed efforts to peacefully democratize Iraq and align themselves with insurgent groups, eventually coming to wield great influence over the incumbent Shia-majority government. The invasion was not solely a move to shift the balance of power in the Middle East but also motivated by Neo-Conservative ideas towards democracy promotion and the Bush administration's unilateralism. That is, endogenous features of the US government played a major role in further contributing to regional instability and were influential in shaping the context of the on-going proxy conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia that is shaping the future of Middle Eastern power politics. I agree with Walt's final point about the dangers of a purely ideational analysis, but again posit that the notions of threat and, subsequently, shared threats cannot be understood without an understanding of the domestic contexts of the countries involved. This is simultaneously a relevant criticism of the Trump administration's dogmatic outlook and contradictory to the earlier arguments concerning a proper analysis of global politics.

Consequently, it is crucial to consider the role that both endogenous and exogenous factors play in shaping the Trump administration's positivistic and temporally fixed version of Neo-realism, specifically in accordance with John Mearsheimer's notion of 'offensive realism'. In this theory, Mearsheimer asserts that, '[t]he fortunes of all states – great power and smaller powers alike – are determined primarily by the decisions and actions of those with the greatest capability' and that 'great powers are determined largely on the basis of their relative military capability' (Mearsheimer 2001). Offensive realism asserts that the international arena is an anarchical system full of inherently distrustful yet rational actors who are out to maximize their self-interests. Two key components of the theory reads that states are less concerned with the prevailing balance of power than aggressively assuring their survival through offensive means and bolstering their military capabilities. In a quote that bares striking similarity to Trump's zero-sum worldview, Mearsheimer argues that in the international arena, states 'look for opportunities to alter the balance of

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power by acquiring additional increments of power at the expense of potential rivals' (2001) and that the best outcome for states is to become a regional hegemon that maintains dominance over their geographical area. This is reflective of the Jacksonian ethos of prioritizing the domestic situation of your own nation before intervening in matters abroad, as well as Trump's rejection of interventions in the name of democracy and his cordial relationships with authoritarian leaders.

A second aspect of offensive realism that resonates with Trump's foreign policy is the idea of buck-passing' where 'great power[s] [try] to get another state to shoulder the burden of deterring or defeating [threatening states]' (Mearsheimer 2001). Buck-passing is a key feature of Trump's foreign policy, as shown by his threats to leave NATO if they do not start paying their 'fair share', or his support of a Japanese nuclear weapons program to deter North Korea. Trump finds the US' agreement to defend Japan to be extremely one-sided, stating, 'if we're attacked, they do not have to come to our defence, if they're attacked, we have to come totally to their defence. And that is a, that's a real problem' (NYT 2016). Trump has explicitly advocated buck-passing, and the strategy is consistent with the views espoused by him and his Jacksonian base's worldview, as well as Mearsheimer's theory. Again, I am describing it as Trumpian offensive realism because of the influence of endogenous factors on the form that this foreign policy takes.

There is no clearer indication of the US' foreign policy intentions than the 2017 National Defence Strategy. The document explicitly outlines how the US intends to vastly increase the role of the military in foreign affairs, and implies a newfound preference for bilateral rather than multilateral diplomacy. The tone of the document adheres to the anarchic pessimism of offensive realism, stating that the 'resurgence' of 'long-term strategic competition' by 'revisionist' powers like Russia and China has created 'global disorder' and a 'security environment more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory' (NDS 2017). The document understands competition between states as the nation's greatest security threat, somewhat surprisingly as it takes precedence over 'terrorism'. The document acknowledges how important it is to 'fortify NATO' whilst strongly emphasizing the demand that Europe 'plays their part'. The document repeatedly mentions the importance of international cooperation, yet, in its most telling excerpt, states that 'collectively, our force posture, alliance and partnership architecture, and Department modernization will provide the capabilities and agility required to prevail in conflict and preserve peace through strength' (NDS 2017). National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster described this as 'principled realism', which I find fitting and somewhat synonymous with my idea of Trumpian offensive realism. The similarity is that the idea of principles aligns itself with the influence of Trump and other endogenous factors on the policy's manifestation. However, it is definitely an offensive policy, especially when combined with the Administration's proposal to slash State Department spending by 29% in 2019 (W. Post 2018), and more akin to Neo-realist than classical realist thought.

## **Conclusion: Implications for the LIO?**

The foreign policy of the Trump administration undoubtedly represents a significant transition away from the orthodoxy of US post-war foreign policy. However, the question of whether Trump's Presidency represents a crisis to the LIO is very difficult to answer because the answer is contingent upon one's conception of the LIO. For example, John Ikenberry defines liberal internationalism 'not as a blueprint for an ideal world order; [but] a methodology or machinery for responding to the opportunities and dangers of modernity' (Ikenberry 2018). Ikenberry asserts that its survival is contingent on two factors: the ability of liberal democracies to progress on from the market fundamentalism of Neoliberal modernity and return to the social democratic ideals of the New Deal that led to the LIO's construction, and the ability of the US to embrace multilateralism and reform the LIO to include a wider coalition of non-Western states. If one perceives of the LIO in the same way as Ikenberry then the LIO is definitely in crisis. The current administration is explicitly and aggressively rejecting multilateral relations and is inherently distrusting of international actors. This is also without mentioning the significant voter base that elected Donald Trump on a mandate that he protect American values and civilization – something that fundamentally opposes the expansion of the LIO to include a wider coalition of non-Western states.

Conversely to Ikenberry, Inderjeet Parmar understands the LIO as a hegemonic US-led project with deeply embedded, 'imperial and racial-civilizational ways of thinking' (Parmar 2018). He writes that,

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Liberal internationalism as a 'theory' or approach to world order, eliding and skirting matters of hierarchy, race and class just as it does in its outline understandings of American democracy, misses a crucial part of the picture – of the dynamics of international power as well as the dynamics of domestic power, [arguing that liberal internationalism is] a legitimating ideology of the American ruling elite (Parmar 2018).

If one adheres to Parmar's view of the LIO, then the Trump Administration's unpredictable and transactional foreign policy is only disruptive in a rhetorical sense. The LIO becomes, above all else, a class project that is perpetuated by the trading regimes and security structures concomitant with US hegemony. Parmar argues that the LIO will never be able to achieve a global order that facilitates equality domestically in Western countries, nor in the global South and that the structure of the LIO will continue to serve both Eastern and Western elites. Parmar posits that this project is destined to continue unless a new project rooted in Gramscian-Kautskiyian thinking emerges to replace the hegemony of transnational elites. If one agrees with Parmar, the Trump Presidency does not represent a crisis for the LIO, but instead represents the deepening of a transnational class project in a different form.

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