

# Trump's Foreign Policy Doctrine of Uncertainty

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WASSIM DAGHRIR, JUN 29 2020

Donald Trump's foreign policy is a matter of continuous controversy and intense scrutiny. This interest stems from the fact that the arena of international relations and the field of American foreign policy are witnessing significant alterations as a consequence of the actions of the Trump administration. The objectives of this article are to identify the defining characteristics of Trump's foreign policy and to assess their faithfulness to traditional and modern-era foreign policy schools. The analysis puts the nature of Pax-Americana and US exceptionalism face to face with the assumption of a post-American world. It also examines the 'Trump Doctrine' as what Trump himself described as a 'brand new' foreign policy (Curran). Thus, this article reflects on the extent to which Trump is establishing a new school of American foreign policy.

### Major Foreign Policy Doctrines and Schools

A presidential doctrine is a constant practice of a particular political ideology which can be defined as,

a set of ideas, beliefs, values, and opinions, exhibiting a recurring pattern, that competes deliberately as well as unintentionally over providing plans of action for public policy making, in an attempt to justify, explain, contest, or change the social and political arrangements and processes of a political community (International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences).

Historically, there have existed four major schools that are eligible to meet these characteristics and requirements. These Schools are the focus of political historian Walter Russell Mead's *Special Providence*. First, he identifies the Hamiltonian School as realist and interventionist, which describes the belief system once held by Alexander Hamilton and based on economic and hegemonic stability to ensure a superpower position for America. Accordingly, the government's main goal is to build a global order of trade and economic relations with other nations, as 'tariffs and trade policy have always been a political levy used to shape national economic interest' (Mead 110). Since the Hamiltonians are interest-driven, avoiding wars, keeping good relations with trading partners and preserving a profitable world economic system is fundamental to the Hamiltonian thought.

Second, Mead investigates the idealist and globalist school led by the 28<sup>th</sup> President of the United States in a period of global unrest after the First World War. The main agenda of the Wilsonian School is humanitarianism and multilateralism. It is dedicated to the spread of peace and the prevention of war. Driven by a belief in the moral obligation of promoting its unique democratic values in the world, Wilsonians put American exceptionalism into practice. The US has the mission of saving other nations from great evils by promoting democracy. The main interest is found in building a world order but 'that order must also be based on principles of democratic government and the protection of human rights' (Mead 139). Thus, the Wilsonian School is universal, driven by the need to spread human rights in an economically prosperous world.

Unlike the previously mentioned schools, the remaining two are not universal but rather specific to America. First, the Jeffersonian School is an idealist and isolationist school of thought. Its focus is directed at domestic welfare and at minimizing foreign relations, by championing an 'America first' strategy. In other words, America should guard a safe space away from the troubled world. The belief in American superior values is advocated by the Jeffersonians who have long perceived the United States as having righteous principles. However, instead of spreading their values to

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the world, they are better preserved by following an isolationist agenda. Nevertheless, the presence of a serious threat can justify intervention abroad.

Last but not least, Mead shifts his focus to the realist and isolationist Jacksonian School. It is,

the most obstructionist of the schools, the least likely to support Wilsonian initiatives for a better world, the least able to understand Jeffersonian calls for patient diplomacy in difficult situations, or the least willing to accept Hamiltonian trade strategies' (W. R. Mead 225).

It denounces such outward looking strategies for they would waste America's initiatives, power and wealth on other nations when it ought to benefit its people first. Jacksonians are reluctant to engage in wars, unless in the presence of a serious threat. However, they draw their own terms on the ways to end the war and that is by the total surrender of the enemy.

## Detecting Trump's Foreign Policy Doctrine

Though specialists are still trying to understand on what basis and under which circumstances Trump builds his views, his pattern of thinking is often labelled as *Trumpism* (Tanenhaus and Sargent). Trumpism alludes to ambiguity and uncertainty and does not have a common or standard definition. In fact, unlike most of his predecessors, Trump is a president with no prior political or military experience. His strong affiliation with the world of money and media has had a tangible impact on his understanding of the world. The president's world-view is transactional and business-oriented (Stephens). In fact, Trump does not espouse a sophisticated world-view. As Stephens puts it, Trump's 'America First' agenda 'draws on populist, isolationist instincts' since it is based on his renunciation of globalism and adherence to nationalism.

It is still contested whether Trump's approach to foreign policy is isolationist or internationalist. In a foreign policy speech during his presidential campaign, Trump announced that his intended foreign policy would replace 'randomness with purpose, ideology with strategy, and chaos with peace.' The building block of his approach to foreign policy is 'America first'. For Trump, to make America first at the global arena is to disengage it from the 'failing' post-Cold War system, including international treaties and institutions (Curran, 4). In his inaugural address in January 2017, Trump announced that America would 'shine as an example for everyone to follow'. However, this example should start from a focus on domestic affairs.

This focus on national interests coupled with his rejection of international institutions pushed many political analysts to consider Trump as an isolationist (Brinkley). In fact, Trump announced the end of humanitarian interventions through his harsh critique of the Obama-Clinton interventionist foreign policy legacies. He also expressed his rejection of George W. Bush's liberal hegemony. Tony Smith describes Trump as 'the most anti-liberal internationalist president' the U.S. has seen since 1940 (quoted in Paterson). On the other hand, Ted Galen Carpenter contends that 'despite the accusations from Trump's critics, Washington remains as hawkish and interventionist as ever.' Hence, Trump is not a full adherent of isolationism nor is he an internationalist.

It may be controversial whether Trump is isolationist or not. However, it is widely agreed that he is a realist. In a foreign policy speech in 2016, Trump announced that 'America First will be the major and overriding theme of [his] administration'. He claimed that his decisions would first and foremost take into consideration 'the interests of American people and American security'. In a rally in Texas in 2018, he laid out his vision saying that, 'a globalist is a person that wants the globe to do well, frankly not caring about the country so much. You know, we can't have that.' Then, he declared himself a 'nationalist'. Theoretically, Trump's approach is *realist par excellence* since it prioritizes American national interests regardless of humanistic or moralistic considerations.

Trump does not miss any chance to express his opposition to multilateralism. First, he describes Obama's multilateral foreign policy as a total failure. Second, he perceives international institutions as a liability and a threat to the US national interests. Finally, this position was translated into acts during the first months of his presidency as he realized one of his campaign promises to withdraw from different international organizations and treaties. Thus, it is

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safe to classify his approach as unilateralist.

Trump's impulsive style as a president is the most controversial feature of his presidency. James B. Stewart described his style as a businessman to be 'impetuous, impolitic, and sometimes immature.' This does not differ from his behaviour in the White House. In fact, White House officials are regularly alarmed by his erratic behaviour according to multiple accounts. In 2018, Bob Woodward published *Fear: Trump in the White House*. The book is based on hundreds of hours of interviews with members of the Trump administration. It portrays the President as an impulsive decision-maker, painting a picture of chaos that Woodward claims amounts to a 'nervous breakdown' of the executive branch.

The language and rhetoric employed by Trump are highly problematic. In fact, his informal style, simple language and repetitive insults endow his style with an incontestable uniqueness. The president is also known for his 'alternative facts' and for his unique understanding of events. According to a five-day analysis done by *Politico*, Trump uttered one fallacy every 3 minutes. Thus, Trump's rhetoric, not far from his personality, is mainly characterized by spontaneity, unpredictability and informality, which adds to the ambiguity of his approach to foreign policy.

It would be fair to argue that Trump's approach to foreign policy does not clearly fit with any of the previously mentioned classical schools. Trump has gone his own way when it comes to conducting foreign policy. The fundamental incoherence is made obvious through Washington's withdrawal from international treaties and agreements. Unsurprisingly, Europeans are increasingly showing open resentment. This weakening of trust could have profound geopolitical implications. Similarly, under Trump's administration, the US-China relationship is turbulent and unstable. In fact, Trump's chaotically aggressive foreign policy concerning China makes it impossible to analyse his foreign policy approach in conventional diplomatic terms. Again, Trump's 'national security' commitment sounds dreary and proves a watershed when it comes to the US-Iran relationship, namely his abandonment of the nuclear deal, which unveiled his unilateralist stance. Such ill-conceived step could undermine US influence in the region and lead to the proliferation of new crises.

Trump's administration has no clear foreign policy pattern. In fact, the President's approach appears to be impulsive, improvisational and devoid of a clear purpose and value as the administration's decisions seem to be erratic, ill-considered and ill-conceived. Since his election Trump's actions, have proved what many observers have long accused him of being – belligerent, rash, chaotic and short-tempered. Trump seems at odds with conventional foreign policy. His actions are bewilderingly unpredictable. He sometimes seeks withdrawal from the world and other times seems capable enough to dominate it and to leverage US strength. Thus, it is hard to separate Trump's flawed character from the policies themselves.

Described as intellectually lazy and self-obsessed, Trump shows no interest in sophisticated theories and ideas. As a businessman, his approach to foreign policy seems to be purely deal-oriented. This is made obvious through his persevering attempts to impose his will on the members of his administration. Trump surrounds himself with sympathetic loyalties, often too weak to stand up to him. Consequently, his foggy vision adds more confusion and unpredictability at the heart of his foreign policy.

Trump's narcissism, manifests itself in the way he conducts presidential tasks. In fact, a narcissist is an "extremely self-centered [person] with an exaggerated sense of self-importance, marked by or characteristic of excessive admiration of or infatuation with oneself" (Lancer). In other words, narcissism is the strife for gratification from vanity or egotistic admiration of one's over-estimated self-image. Attributes of narcissism may expand to include self-flattery and arrogance. Succinctly put, Trump's vanity and arrogance do not only manifest themselves in the way he carries out his foreign policy agenda, but also in the way he reports it, thus reinforcing the belief that Trump's narcissism is impacting his foreign policy approach.

Among Trump's most evident traits are his anti-intellectualism and his populist tendencies. This perspective is shared by a member of Trump's 2016 campaign staff who revealed that,

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Trump doesn't and maybe can't read, so he finds coherent speech problematic, and soon degenerates into dodgery, repetition or vile invective; Twitter is his chosen mode of utterance because it matches the spasmodic urges by which he is impelled (Wolff).

This ushers in that Trump's narcissism and irrationality are nothing but a drop in the ocean compared to his lack of learning. Thus, he might be inadequate to head the state and a pose threat in doing so.

Trump's unpredictability and irrationality could be interpreted through his contradicting statements. He promised to put 'America first', yet proceeded to spend American taxpayers' dollars on bombing Syria. He openly expresses his admiration for the Russian president, yet proceeds to implement strict sanctions against Russia. His unpredictability was also conveyed through two contradicting statements in the span of a year. First, in Trump's presidential campaign of April 2016, he put emphasis on the vitality of diplomacy by stating the following: 'Unlike other candidates for the presidency, war and aggression will not be my first instinct. You cannot have a foreign policy without diplomacy' (Trump). One year later, he threatened North Korea by stating that it 'best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with fire and the fury like the world has never seen' (Trump), radically shifting his stance in the span of a year.

As a business-oriented president, Trump's approach in the international arena consists of applying economic pressure through tariffs or sanctions, in order to make his rivals settle. The case of the Iran nuclear deal unveils this very method in motion. The American president seeks to disrupt the well functioning of a government through the destabilization of the economy. Trump threatened to impose 'the highest level of economic sanctions on Iran' (Cherkaoui) and to prevent any European company from pursuing business there, thus putting the future of the Iranian market in his grip. This, indeed, is how businessmen arrange potential profitable markets through zoning them out from other competitors and by financially rewarding cooperative customers and sanctioning fallouts. Trump's style of constantly seeking a better deal emanates from his real estate background, which influences the way he makes foreign affairs transactional and competitive.

## A Trumpian World of Uncertainty

The rationale of this article stems from an attempt at classifying Trump's foreign policy approach into one of the classical schools. As findings may display, the Trump administration's foreign policy falls short of the different traditional approaches, ranging from isolationism to internationalism, realism to idealism and unilateralism to multilateralism. Trump's theoretical isolationism clashing with his practical interventionism could best be referred to as a *Trumpian World of Uncertainty*.

Trump once announced the end of humanitarian interventions. In a sudden decision to pull US troops out of Syria from combating Islamic State terrorists on October 23, 2019, President Donald Trump argued,

Let someone else fight over this long-bloodstained sand... the plan is to get out of endless wars, to bring our soldiers back home, to not be policing agents all over the world.

This statement might announce the beginning of the end of the American universal mission. In fact, promising to 'Make America Great Again', Trumpism may break ties with US' hegemonic traditions. The president's repetitive recurrence to isolationism and the absence of specific policy patterns that have long stood since the indoctrination of interventionism raise many questions and put forth the possibility of a post-exceptionalism foreign policy.

Nevertheless, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Turkey, China and North Korea have all been under Trump's crosshairs ever since he was elected head of state. Trump seems to manufacture more enemies by the day. His political incorrectness, coupled with his poor diplomatic and imprecise oratory skills, create tensions that usually end in cross-national conflicts. The ambiguous agenda of a self-proclaimed isolationist who has kept expanding the list of US enemies could be best described as another element of the Trumpian world of uncertainty.

The classical schools were of paramount significance to the myriad of American presidents who took office after the

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indoctrination of American interventionism in the midst of the Second World War. However, Trump's foreign policy approach, generally, and more often than not, has proved to be incoherent, making the future of American diplomacy hazy and unpredictable. On the one hand, this might herald a new departure for a post-Exceptionalist American foreign policy doctrine that is impulsive yet functional, unpredictable yet realist, chaotic yet pragmatic. Trumpism could be on its way to thrive as a unique and an atypical form of managing international affairs that favours a more Isolationist and Unilateralist approach, with emphasis on soft power and cutting deals through economic rewards and sanctions rather than military deployment.

On the other hand, this might entail the end of American dominance in world affairs and a shift of power hierarchy from the United States to the hands of emerging superpowers such as China. Trump's demotivation *vis-à-vis* the international arena and his denouncing of global affairs might halt American supranational dominance. This decline of Pax-Americana may possibly entail the collapse of the current world order and the move to a new one, where US international influence is diminishing. The Trump administration's way of conducting foreign policy might result in the decline of American global dominance as an underlying result of political and economic incompetence.

## Conclusion

In the hope of untangling this highly complex and ambiguous foreign policy, the synthesis is two fold. First, Trump's paradoxical and ambiguous foreign policy puts forth a new *Trumpian Doctrine of Uncertainty*, one that is chaotic yet pragmatic, impulsive yet functional, unpredictable yet realist. Second, the implications of such an atypical doctrine may lead to the decline of Pax-Americana, as an outcome of Trump's apathy towards international affairs. This view is supported by Zakaria, who predicted a relative diminishing of American global dominance in the near future. His 'Post-American World' thesis puts forth the possibility of a change in global power hierarchy and a possible shift in the current world order.

Cross-matching Trump's personality with his foreign policy also highlight a tight correlation between both. The president's arrogance, narcissism, anti-intellectualism, populism, belligerence, unpredictability and transactional thinking are reflected in his way of conducting foreign affairs. A critical examination of Trump's personality consolidates that the American foreign policy is a replica of Donald Trump's personality features. The sharp symmetry between the president's traits and his foreign policy agenda, coupled with the absence of a specific underlying school of thought and the incoherence of his statements deem pinpointing policy patterns an impossibility during his tenure.

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