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The Trump Doctrine: America First, Not American Exceptionalism

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The Trump Doctrine: America First, Not American Exceptionalism

Abstract

President Donald Trump's foreign policy has developed out of an "America First" ideology that comprises both isolationism and interventionism depending on the situation. This differs from President Barack Obama's preference for the ideology of American Exceptionalism, which placed America on an equal playing field with other nations and utilized international organizations, such as the United Nations and trade organizations. Most of the Trump Doctrine has arisen out of an intentional shift from "typical" foreign policy of Obama and previous, even Republican, presidents. While Trump is influenced by his White House advisers, he has sidelined the State Department and tends to take action aligning with his own preferences rather than those of his political peers. Ultimately, there is a Trump Doctrine, but it is more informal than, for example, the Monroe Doctrine, and is based on politics of personal preference and emotion rather than a strict following of any one policy model.

Keywords

President Trump, Foreign Policy, Trump Doctrine, Presidential Powers, America First

Disciplines

American Politics | International Relations | Political Science | Political Theory

Comments

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President Donald Trump's foreign policy has developed out of an "America First" ideology that comprises both isolationism and interventionism depending on the situation. This differs from President Barack Obama's preference for the ideology of American Exceptionalism, which placed America on an equal playing field with other nations and utilized international organizations, such as the United Nations and trade organizations. Most of the Trump Doctrine has arisen out of an intentional shift from "typical" foreign policy of Obama and previous, even Republican, presidents. While Trump is influenced by his White House advisers, he has sidelined the State Department and tends to take action aligning with his own preferences rather than those of his political peers. Ultimately, there is a Trump Doctrine, but it is more informal than, for example, the Monroe Doctrine, and is based on politics of personal preference and emotion rather than a strict following of any one policy model.

President Donald Trump's foreign policy has differed greatly from President Barack Obama's foreign policy. The so-called "Trump Doctrine" has shaped his foreign policy over the last four years, including but not limited to, his "America First" mindset, and what Michael Anton describes as a mindset of "Let's all put our own countries first, and be candid about it, and recognize that it's nothing to be ashamed of. Putting our interests first will make us all safer and more prosperous" (Anton 2019). However, other individuals have deemed that this isn't so much a foreign policy doctrine in the way the Monroe Doctrine was, but instead, actions that are merely guided by Trump's feelings. Daniel Larison of *The American Conservative* instead argues that "There is no 'Trump Doctrine' as such. There is a hodgepodge of competing influences and factions in the Trump administration, and depending on which ones happen to be ascendant on certain issues the capricious president will go this way or that without any pretense of consistency or overall strategy." (Larison 2019). Larison, though, does not seem to account for trends in foreign policy, and attributes all of Trump's foreign policy decisions to whichever "faction" is winning that day. However, one could argue instead that there is a clear method to the president's madness, one that undercuts what became normal under President Barack Obama, even if it is a more informal doctrine rather than a set of clear policies.

Jacob Shapiro and George Friedman provide three tenants to the Trump Doctrine: that America "overextends" itself in honoring alliances, that trade should be thought of as what's best for America, not the rest of the world, and that "rigid multilateralism" is no longer valuable in the post-Cold War world (Friedman and

Shapiro 2017, 12-13). Even more so, the Trump Doctrine reflects much of the President's personality, as Thomas Wright says, "The best guide to President Trump's foreign policy is to understand his psychology and disposition, not to study his administration's formal policy documents and actions" (Wright 2020, 4), although arguably, the formal policy documents and actions Wright speaks of are just as reflective of his Doctrine and his personality. Max Fisher highlights that much of Trump's foreign policy goals revolve around "reduc[ing] America's role in the world" (Fisher 2016), then going further to note that his "America First" ideology "would be a significant break with the role Washington has played in upholding the global order since the end of World War II" (Fisher 2016). Mara Oliva defines his doctrine similarly, saying, "Trump spent his one term in the White House rolling back...many of the policies of his predecessor, Barack Obama, withdrawing from international institutions and treaties, and weakening historical alliances" (Oliva 2020), highlighting the important shift from the Obama Doctrine to the Trump Doctrine.

According to an article from Jeffrey Goldberg, "A core principle of the Obama Doctrine is dead. President Trump's governing foreign policy doctrine is not easily discernible, of course. His recent statements about Syria—kaleidoscopic in their diversity—combined with his decision to order an attack, have half-convincing me that he is something wholly unique in the history of the presidency: an isolationist interventionist" (Goldberg 2017). This idea that Trump is an "isolationist interventionist" is not unique to Goldberg. This can be most acutely seen through his signing or designing of treaties or executive agreements since "Trump believes that existing international military and commercial arrangements have been disproportionately costly for the United States, and must be reoriented or renegotiated in the opposite direction. This is not the same as seeking a complete dismantling of America's post-World War II commitments, and the distinction is crucial...He looks to pull existing arrangements in the direction of what he views as material US interests, and is open to either renegotiating or abandoning those arrangements case by case" (Dueck 2020). When withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the White House said, "It is the policy of my Administration to represent the American people and their financial well-being in all negotiations, particularly the American worker, and to create fair and economically beneficial trade deals that serve their interests" (White House 2017). The Trans-Pacific Partnership

was a free trade agreement with twelve other Pacific nations that Trump withdrew from because “he believed that it steals American jobs while benefiting large corporations” (Pham 2017). It was agreed upon in 2005 under Republican President George W. Bush, proving that Trump’s decisions undermine that of former Republicans, as well (McBride and Chatzky 2019). The common thread here is Trump affirming American interests; if a trade agreement didn’t help the American people, in his opinion, then he wouldn’t involve himself with it simply to appease other nations. His perspective on the United Nations reflects similar sentiments that “the UN is...not...a forum for defusing international conflict through debate and consensus (or for the venting of grievances and hot air), but...a mechanism that operates to unfairly limit American freedom of movement while demanding American support” (Joffe 2018).

These policy decisions are strongly representative of the “America First” ideology. Goldberg notes in another *Atlantic* article that a senior official said, “Obama apologized to everyone for everything. He felt bad about everything.” President Trump, ‘doesn’t feel like he has to apologize for anything America does’” (Goldberg 2018). This mindset defines the “America First” ideology as one where the president puts the preferences of America over those of other nations. Similar to pulling out of international organizations that allow other nations to rely on the United States, these actions are based on self-interest and self-preservation as it pertains to America. Derek Reveron and Nikolas Gvosdev note that, “Trump, under the rubric of ‘America First,’ was particularly critical of military interventions driven by specific internationalist narratives, such as the global war on terrorism or the responsibility to protect, rather than interventions dedicated towards advancing traditional notions of national interests centered on American prosperity and national security” (Reveron and Gvosdev 2017, 43). The caveat of this is the interventionism that comes with putting America first, as Victor Hanson puts it, “When forced to respond to an attack on an American asset or ally, the U.S. could do so disproportionately, destructively, and without any red line, promise, or virtue-signaling about what it might do next — given its unique ability to hit abroad without being hit at home, and with a well-oiled economy that has no need to beg the Saudis to be nice, or to urge the Iranians to pump more, or to get the Venezuelans back into the exporting business”

(Hanson 2019). Part of putting America First is ensuring that America is so strong no country threatens it out of fear they will be decimated in response.

Fareed Zakaria argues that The Trump Doctrine in part reflects John Bolton's influence while he served as National Security Advisor. He says, "Bolton believes that to protect itself and project its power, the United States must be aggressive, unilateral and militant. Bolton seems to share the worldview that animated Richard B. Cheney, who after 9/11 spoke openly about the need to 'work . . . the dark side' and to 'use any means at our disposal, basically, to achieve our objective.'" (Zakaria 2019). However, as Wright notes, "Trump...[pursued] his instincts even when they conflicted with the advice of his officials. He announced talks with Kim Jong-un without consulting his cabinet...He tweeted his response to Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons before talking with his national security team" (Wright 2020, 7). Through this, it becomes apparent that few people actually had a say in Trump's foreign policy decisions except those the President kept close to him. Elizabeth Saunders notes, "Trump's advisers are neither constraining him nor channeling his preferences into coherent policies," (Saunders 2018) recalling Trump's Tweets against Kim Jong-un and North Korea and an instance of him removing mention of NATO Article 5—"collective defense" (NATO 2019)—as reflective of actions that typically left out high-ranking advisers (Saunders 2018). Wright agrees, continuing to say that Bolton himself "abolished the interagency process through which the Departments of Defense and State...have formal seats at the table where decisions are made" (Wright 2020, 7). Possibly more importantly, Saunders reflects that "Trump himself has left little doubt that [a] shortage [of ambassadors], as well as the shrinking of the State Department, is deliberate, declaring in response to a question about State Department job vacancies that 'I'm the only one that matters'" (Saunders 2018). These claims add up to a picture of the Trump Administration as one that sidelines any views that may not agree with him, including those coming from the State Department, prioritizing his beliefs over those who may even have more experience and expertise. Even more evidence that Trump would rather the State Department be less involved in his policy is the 30 percent budget and eight percent staff cut he and former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson unsuccessfully proposed in 2017 (Zengerle 2017)

Moreover, according to Bryan Bender, “Trump, to the dismay of many longtime NSC veterans, elevated his top political strategist Steve Bannon as a permanent member of the council —a break with tradition that has sought to keep politics out of the national security decision-making process as much as possible. And in another unusual step, he has separately empowered his son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner with a foreign policy portfolio that includes the Middle East” (Bender 2017). This highlights who really has influence on the Trump Doctrine, more people with positions like Kushner and Bannon (until he left the White House) than the State Department. This is further emphasized by the instance where Trump reduced troops in Germany and “sources familiar with the matter said a number of U.S. officials at the White House, State Department and Pentagon were surprised by the decision and they offered explanations ranging from Trump’s pique over the G7 to the influence of Richard Grenell, the former U.S. ambassador to Germany and a Trump loyalist” (Landay, Shahal, and Mohammed 2020). The surprise at a decision that in most administrations would involve the State Department and the Pentagon emphasizes Trump’s abandonment of these bodies in his foreign policy decisions. The Trump Doctrine, instead of being founded on general political principles, is one founded on Trump’s emotions, public image, and what he personally gains from his actions. Bolton, in fact, said privately that he believed Trump’s unprecedented decision to not back a sanction on Turkey that had bipartisan Congressional support was a result of his personal business interests in his property in Turkey (Ruhle and Lee 2019).

Despite the sidelining of the State Department, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has played a role in crafting and enacting the Trump Doctrine. In a speech Pompeo gave on “Respecting Life in America’s Foreign Policy,” Pompeo touched upon goals of the Trump Administration when it came to intervention in other nations. While “America First” clearly guided much of the administration’s actions, Pompeo made a clear nod toward the opposite, more interventionist actions, such as his role in the Abraham Accords, which he described as, “the greatest step forward for peace in the Middle East in a generation. We flipped the switch. We took 40 years of history where people said you can’t get peace to the Middle East until you resolve the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people. We said you could do this a different way. We could improve security for Israel. We could make the region safer. We could decrease instability” (Pompeo 2020), and elsewhere in anti-abortion stances at

the UN and against violations of religious freedom in China. This returns to the aforementioned “isolationist-interventionist” role of the Trump Administration in foreign nations, which is guided by more than just Trump’s “America First” values. Josh Rogin of *The Washington Post* notes that “If compelled to choose, the MAGA foreign policy platform seems more politically expedient...The problem is, Republicans like Pompeo likely believe in Reagan’s vision over Trump’s and would prefer to govern that way as well” (Rogin 2020). Rogin compares Trump and Reagan’s foreign policy, highlighting that Reagan, unlike Trump, bolstered democracy (Rogin 2020). Therefore, the foreign policy decisions of isolationism and interventionism represent rifts in the Republican Party and a changing shift toward anti-democracy (exemplified by Trump’s unwillingness to concede to Vice President Joe Biden and his close ties to Russia and North Korea’s governments) instead of the more typically Republican preference for democracy. These differing opinions also represent a rift in the White House that could explain Trump’s reasoning behind alienating the State Department.

Trump’s election in 2016 represented a shift from old to new order within the American government. As Major Garrett says in *Mr. Trump’s Wild Ride*, “[World leaders] quickly realized how nationalistic Trump was and how much of his rhetoric was real. Washington was shifting and many leaders, at least rhetorically, began to adapt...What is clear is that Trump forced the country and the world to study what ‘America First’ meant. Trump stepped away from multilateralism. He stepped toward tariffs. He resurrected the word ‘reciprocal’ to describe new trade arrangements” (Garrett 2018, 18). Seth Frantzman highlights that the Trump Doctrine “consisted of a skepticism...as to the US role in the world. Moving away from the George H.W. Bush ‘new world order,’ it sought to reduce the US footprint abroad, and called on other countries to pay for things like NATO and foreign wars” (Frantzman 2019). These actions are reflective of campaign promises Trump made to “abandon the ‘Washington playbook,’ force allies to pay their fair share for American protection and support, retrench from overseas bases, and renegotiate trade deals with friends and spheres of interests with competitors” (Haffa 2017, 13). Trump’s reasoning for these decisions comes from “[unhappiness] with America’s military alliances and [feelings that] the United States is overcommitted around the world...Trump seeks nothing less than ending the U.S.-led liberal order and freeing America from its international commitments,” (Wright 2016) further

implicating that Trump's foreign policy goals revolved more around stepping back from the international world instead of finding new places to leave a mark. Wright wrote that statement prior to the 2016 election, but given Trump's actions over the last four years, little has changed about Trump's opinion on where America should stand relative to the rest of the world, given even the most recent action to remove the United States from the World Health Organization amidst the coronavirus pandemic (Mills 2020).

Randall Schweller puts it simply: "Trump has sent the message that the United States will now look after its own interests, not those of the so-called global community" (Schweller 2018, 1). Further examples of this include withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the North American Free-Trade Agreement, and the Paris Climate Accord (Mills 2020). In Trump's Rose Garden statement about the withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord, he said, "I was elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris...I promised I would exit or renegotiate any deal which fails to serve America's interests...Very rarely do we have a deal that works for this country, but they'll soon be under renegotiation" (White House 2017). This clearly exemplifies Schweller's message. If Trump saw an organization or agreement as unsuitable to the country's needs, he abandoned it. Similarly, the editors of World Politics Review note that, "While Trump has cozied up to despots, including Russia's Vladimir Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong Un, he has repeatedly and publicly criticized America's democratic allies, often accusing them of taking advantage of the United States" (World Politics Review 2020). Trump firmly assured the world that he—and the country—would not be taken advantage of by leaving these organizations, for better or for worse, while also "shak[ing] world leaders' confidence in America's ability to lead" (Mills 2020).

This differs greatly from the Obama Doctrine, outlined by *The Heritage Foundation*. They say, "President Obama...said that America would reach out to other countries as "an equal partner" rather than as the "exceptional" nation that many before him had embraced. During his first meeting with the Group of 20 economies in Europe, Obama went further, saying that he does believe in American exceptionalism, but "just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism" (Holmes and Carafano 2010). Evan Resnick explains that "American Exceptionalism" is a "widely held belief

among U.S. elites and the general public holds that the United States has a special mission to project abroad its core domestic values of democracy, individual freedom, and the rule of law, a process that will eventually culminate in global peace and prosperity” (Resnick 2020). Trump’s rhetoric, on the other hand, reflects his followers’ desire for America to be prioritized, leading to argument that “Trump’s illiberal exceptionalism has unsurprisingly alienated the United States from its traditional allies and partners, diminishing its soft power” (Resnick 2020). James Curran says this turn away from historic “American Exceptionalism” by Trump is reminiscent of President Richard Nixon’s Doctrine “calling for US allies in [Asia] to provide more for their own self defense, and signaling that Washington would not again involve itself in another land war in Asia” (Curran 2018, 7). In fact, Peter Van Buren noted that “Pro-Trump sentiment in rural areas especially was driven in part by people who agreed with his anti-war critique, voters who’d either served or saw their kids serve in Obama’s endlessly metastasizing wars” (Van Buren 2020).

Where Trump planned to leave interventionism behind, Obama and many other previous presidents fought “endless” wars in the name of American Exceptionalism. Trump’s win in 2016 reflects an American sentiment of being tired of fighting war for the sake of war. A White House statement on foreign policy argues that “President Trump is the first American leader since Ronald Reagan not to start a war. Instead, he has rebuilt our military, restored American sovereignty, and renewed the “peace through strength” foreign policy that helped the United States win the Cold War” (White House 2020). The United States flexed its military muscles, exhibiting this “peace through strength” ideology to avoid war, through the drone strike that killed Qasem Soleimani (Council on Foreign Relations 2020). Moreover, where Obama was cautious about promising an end to wars as “the president is aware that someone, seven years later, is going to hold you to that promise” (Goldberg 2016), Trump has blatantly promised the end the “endless” wars (Crowley 2020). Whether he has succeeded is neither here nor there; it is the nature of the promises that shows a significant difference in the Obama and Trump Doctrine. Side-by-side, Trump appears more forceful in his tackling of the Middle East, even if in “seven years” the world will look back at Trump’s promises and ask why he wouldn’t fulfill them.

Andreas Krieg compares Trump and Obama's use of power in the Middle East by suggesting Trump used "hard power" and Obama used "soft power: protecting U.S. values and interests in cooperation with local and regional partners" (Krieg 2017, 141). Earlier Krieg noted that, under Trump, "An 'America First' policy...when applied to the Middle East means that only vital U.S. interests will be secured" (Krieg 2017, 141). The Obama Doctrine recalls a history of American Exceptionalism whereas the Trump Doctrine calls forth a new history to be made of no longer allowing foreign nations to rely on America anymore, as aforementioned with the decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accords. Ross Douthat suggests that Trump doesn't necessarily want "to cede United States primacy or abandon American alliances, as Trump's opponents often charge; rather, it's to maintain American primacy on a more manageable footing, while focusing more energy and effort on containing the power and influence of China" (Douthat 2019). Ghosh says, "the president no longer desires to see the US engaged in endless wars...through the doctrine, Trump was reducing Washington's tendency to get stuck in 'any and every war.'" (Ghosh 2020). Ghosh attributes these goals to the three Nobel Peace Prize nominations Trump has received as a result of his Middle Eastern Abraham Accords and the peace presumed to follow in the virulent region.

One of the first representations of the shift in foreign policy goals from Trump and Obama came from Trump's first foreign trip. Michael Shear and Baker call the visit to Saudi Arabia "a blunt rejection of President Barack Obama's vision for the region. Mr. Obama sought a reconciliation with Iran and negotiated a deal intended to keep Tehran from developing nuclear weapons" (Shear and Baker 2017). Moreover, Trump visited Israel following Saudi Arabia, which allowed him to "avoid Mr. Obama's stumble in deciding to skip Israel. Many Israelis never overcame their suspicion of him after that, and his relationship with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu deteriorated into mutual loathing" (Landler and Baker 2017). Choosing Saudi Arabia and Israel for his first international visit set the stage for the rest of the Trump Presidency and his foreign policy goals, putting the region and the Israel and Palestine crisis at the foreground. Garrett commented on this as history-making, considering Saudi Arabia had yet to be visited first by a president; that honor was usually bestowed upon close allies (Garrett 2018, 186). Trump made a clear statement against the Obama Administration by not only visiting Israel as part of the trip but establishing a firm desire to alienate Iran by working with Saudi Arabia.

Trump's foreign policy emphasizes the necessity of shrinking China's international role. George Friedman says The Trump Doctrine has a preference of "offensive economic policy" while avoiding putting America in a position of needing to react militarily (Friedman 2018). Director of the National Economic Council Larry Kudlow has played a role in the Trump Doctrine, particularly in formulating economic policy with China. Kudlow noted in a discussion with Julia Limitone that Trump ultimately wants free trade, but Kudlow said he "isn't expecting a radical shift anytime soon...Trump is taking a 'wait and see' approach to trade relations [with China]" (Limitone 2018). Dov Zakheim, however, suggests instead that actions Trump takes with foreign nations are merely pawns "to nourish his narcissism and to aggrandize his family's fortunes" (Zakheim 2020). Paul Pillar echoes this sentiment from Zakheim, highlighting how "It...doesn't matter to [Trump] whether the administration's response does anything to help residents of Hong Kong or to deter or dissuade China. What matters is to sustain a general image of toughness in response to bad things China does" (Pillar 2020).

The Congressional Research Service outlines the results of Trump's presidency saying, that "the Administration's America First construct, its emphasis on national sovereignty...for U.S. foreign policy, and other Administration actions...form a new U.S. role characterized by a voluntary retreat from...global leadership, a greater reliance on unilateralism, a reduced willingness to work through international or multilateral institutions and agreements, an acceptance of U.S. isolation or near-isolation on certain international issues, a more skeptical view of the value of alliances to the United States, a less-critical view of certain authoritarian... governments...and an implicit tolerance of the reemergence of aspects of a might-makes-right international order" (O'Rourke and Moodie 2020, 6). These actions and ideologies pit the Trump Administration's foreign policy against that of Obama and that of previous administrations. The Trump Doctrine reflects a shift in foreign policy that will undoubtedly be overturned by the following administration, with President-Elect Joseph Biden already making promises to rejoin the Paris Climate Accord and the World Health Organization (Dorman 2020). Trump's consistent preference for authoritarian regimes and overturning or pulling out of multilateral agreements and organizations emphasizes that there is in fact a Trump Doctrine guiding this presidency, no matter how informal its design may be.

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