Donald Trump’s “America First” Policy

Rarely does a new U.S. administration come into office with a full-fledged coherent approach to foreign policy recognizable to a theorist of foreign policy or international relations. Rather, on the campaign trail, they proffer a series of foreign policy positions, whether consistent with or at odds with current U.S. policy and, once in office, take actions in response to world events and opportunities—again, sometimes consistent with previous policy and sometimes taking the nation in new directions. The Trump campaign, and now the Trump administration, has been no different than others in this regard. However, as with previous administrations, analysts like us search for a coherent set of principles that help make sense of an administration’s foreign policy, more often than not attaching “doctrine” to a particular president that captures some essential features of their foreign policies. Thus, in the course, we have described the Truman doctrine, the Nixon doctrine, the Reagan doctrine, and the Bush doctrine. Of course, administrations’ foreign-policy ideologies often go by other labels—“containment” and “détente” are two that you now know well.

After eighteen months in office, the most common label we see attached to President Trump’s foreign policy is America First. It is still a bit early in his tenure to elucidate a consistent set of principles that bring coherence to the administration’s foreign policy actions or help to predict future actions should he be elected to a second term. That’s not criticism in and of itself. It’s still not clear, for example, even after eight years in office, if there is something we can call, in retrospect, an Obama doctrine, at least that would mark his foreign policies as something distinctive in relation to either his predecessors or what early in the course we called “national style.” Still, as analysts, we are tempted to look for such principles to help us grasp the rhyme and reason behind the accumulation of foreign policy actions taken by the U.S. government.

Political scientists often try to square these approaches to policy with our theories of international relations—liberalism, realism, internationalism, unilateralism, etc. Recall the diagrams included in previous lectures, which tried to make sense of the foreign-policy debates following the end of the cold war and the U.S. response to 9/11. Historians, despite not being terribly fond of our social science -isms, often engage in much the same sort of intellectual exercise. Walter Russell Mead was one of the first to help make sense of the principles likely to guide U.S. foreign policy during the Trump administration, though in doing so he prefers more personalized labels to our generic -isms.

In an article for Foreign Affairs in 2017, Mead refers to Trump’s foreign policy as Jacksonian. Andrew Jackson, the populist seventh U.S. president, served two terms from 1829 to 1837 and pursued a domestic agenda promoting the rights and interests of the common man as against corrupt political elites. His foreign policy concentrated on westward expansion and securing
U.S. territory on the North American continent, although he also concluded a number of trade agreements with European powers. For Mead, Trump’s foreign policy is Jacksonian not so much because it will resemble Jackson’s own foreign policy—that was a very different time and place—but instead because it will be driven by the same preoccupation with “the physical security and economic well-being of the American people in their national home.” The parallel Mead draws to the 1820s and 1830s is that, like Trump’s electoral base today, “Jacksonian America felt itself to be under siege, with its values under attack and its future under threat.”

This does seem consistent with Trump’s rhetoric on the campaign trail and in his many campaign-like rallies since taking office. But does this help make sense of Trump’s foreign policy so far? One core element is his foreign policy has been a combative approach to U.S. trade relations. This is evident in tariffs imposed on goods from global competitors like China, which is not surprising given long-standing complaints about Chinese trade practices, but also on goods from traditional allies like Canada, Mexico, Japan, South Korea, and the EU, which the President has also taken to calling “competitors” and even “foes” in the realm of trade. Such actions are appealing to Trump’s electoral base because they are supposed to improve their economic well-being, not because his supporters have any particular animus toward those countries. (Whether, in the end, they actually have improved well-being, or will, is another question.) The administration’s withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement and the Paris Agreement on climate change sent the same message that the economic interests of Americans come first and will not be compromised for other gains. Trump’s seeming contempt for the EU and his support of Brexit, moreover, suggests that he believes other leaders should also prioritize the economic interests of their own nationals.

This Jacksonian approach to U.S. foreign policy is opposed to what Mead refers to as the Hamiltonian view, after the founding father and first Secretary of the Treasury. Alexander Hamilton was an architect of the nation’s financial system and promoted an integrated national economy built on manufacturing, which in turn would become the foundation of a strong military. Hamiltonians, says Mead, are what we have been calling internationalists; they believe the U.S. should be actively engaged in the maintenance of world order, mainly because that is what best serves American interests. This Hamiltonian approach has been a feature of U.S. foreign policy since World War II, although Mead points out that the Hamiltonian preoccupation with the nation’s economic interests has had to make room for moralistic aims like the promotion of democracy and human rights, a legacy of President Woodrow Wilson’s internationalist foreign policy.

Recall that in the debate over the future of U.S. foreign policy following the end of the cold war, some argued that the U.S. should substantially retreat from its international commitments, a perspective I called neo-isolationism. The internationalists won that argument and the post-cold war period in U.S. foreign policy has been a back-and-forth about what form internationalism should take: Hamiltonian or Wilsonian. But Trump’s advocacy of an America First policy has reinvigorated that neo-isolationist (and Jacksonian) perspective and some of the other controversial foreign-policy actions taken by this administration might be understood in this light. Foremost among these is Trump’s attitude toward NATO. Since the presidential
campaign, Trump has been castigating NATO members for contributing too little to collective defense, and his conduct has raised questions among the leaders of member states about whether the U.S. can be counted upon to come to a member’s defense as stipulated by Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Fully extricating the U.S. from its NATO commitments, whether over burden-sharing disputes or some other pretext, would be an extreme move, but Trump’s willingness to question the merits of “transatlanticism”—the notion that the political and economic values shared by the peoples of Europe and North America warrant the maintenance of an alliance for their defense—is borne of an isolationist sentiment consistent with a Jacksonian foreign policy.

The President’s approach to Russia is something of a puzzle. His attraction to Vladimir Putin may have as much to do with his personal interests as his perception of U.S. national interests. If the Trump Organization is deeply entangled with Russian finance, or if Trump is leveraged by virtue of compromising information Putin controls, that could account for President’s curiously pro-Russian positions—epitomized, of course, by his bizarre and universally panned conduct at the Helsinki summit in 2019. However, setting this possibility aside, the President may hope that diffusing the continuing tension with Russia, even by means of appeasement, will make it easier for the U.S. to maintain a lower geopolitical profile in order to focus on his domestic priorities. If appeasement simply encourages Russian aggression, then dissension within NATO may prevent it from reacting and dragging the U.S. into yet another military conflict. Either outcome is consistent with the aims of a Jacksonian foreign policy orientation.

Presidents are never able to turn the ship of state on a dime. The U.S. presidency is a fairly weak office in comparison to other executives, given how governing powers are distributed. Although presidential power is greatest in the area of foreign policy, Trump is also cutting against the grain of a foreign policy establishment built around seven decades of Hamiltonian and Wilsonian internationalism. Hence his frustration with “the deep state.” Even if his foreign policy positions were perfectly coherent, completely faithful to Jacksonian principles, the actual policies pursued by the U.S. government may appear inconsistent with those principles. The U.S. president is not in total control of the nation’s foreign policy. The pushback from Congress on the Russia sanctions, which Trump was hoping to end, is a case in point.

One last observation: Trump’s America First policy is indeed a break with contemporary U.S. foreign policy, or at least attempts to do so. But it would be a mistake to conflate the President’s unprecedented conduct with unprecedented policies. His more controversial actions so far have been nixing the Paris Agreement, TPP, and the Iran nuclear deal. But all three faced a lot of opposition when they were concluded, which is why the Obama administration negotiated them as executive “agreements” and not treaties requiring ratification by the. Many American presidents have pressured NATO countries to spend more of defense, and many presidents have sought to improve relations with “hostile” states and have negotiated with dictators. This is not to excuse Trump’s aberrant and sometimes (in my view) shameful conduct on the world stage; it is to suggest that we are likely to find a fair amount of continuity in U.S. foreign policy once we look beyond the bombast and bravado, as many foreign leaders have quickly learned to do.