

Donald Trump's Geopolitical
Framework for Northeast Asia:
Something Borrowed,
Something New

Mark Tokola

Does the forty-fifth president of the United States, Donald J. Trump, have a foreign policy, not least of all inclusive of the vital Northeast Asian region? The question is not flippant. Policy is usually thought of as a set of principles that guide action towards a desired outcome. Trump may, as he professes, act from instinct – reactively and transactionally rather than from an intent to implement an established policy. In the eyes of some of his supporters, this would be a virtue. They elected him expressly for the purpose of breaking with a traditional Washington policy machinery that they did not believe was serving their interests. However, Trump and his administration do assert and describe a distinct foreign policy. They even have a name for it, “principled realism.”¹ Moreover, when Trump was running for the presidency in 2016, he announced his intention to “develop a new foreign policy direction for our country, one that replaces randomness with purpose, ideology with strategy, and chaos with peace.” He stated, “It’s time to shake the rust off America’s foreign policy.”²

Understanding Trump’s foreign policy is not an abstract exercise. American voters will need to decide in November 2020 whether they want the policy to continue. Knowing what it is will help them make that decision. They will have to measure it against what Trump’s Democratic rival describes as his or her foreign policy. Foreign governments also seek to understand Trump’s actions, offers, and demands through the lens of what they understand his foreign policy to be. As the North Korean nuclear threat looms, China’s economy perches perilously on the edge of the precipice of the COVID-19 epidemic, and U.S. allies Japan and South Korea stand off in a history-inspired trade war, does Trump have a strategy to manage such regional challenges?

Trying to understand Trump’s foreign policy in any particular region, such as Northeast Asia, requires an understanding of his overall perspective. He sees the world as the entire world, not as a set of distinct regions. Trump’s foreign policy is based on principles which apply everywhere. The hallmarks of his approach have been his use of social media, the value he places on unpredictability, and his *Art of the Deal* (the title of his 1987 book, part memoir and part business advice) approach to international negotiations. These are tactics, however, not principles. This paper defines the principles of the Trump foreign policy, examines whether they fit within a tradition of American foreign policy, tries to answer the question of whether they are an aberration or likely to continue in a post-Trump era, and outlines strategies other countries may be using to counter or accommodate Trump’s foreign policy, bringing the focus back to the challenges mounting in Northeast Asia and how Trump’s approach is impacting the region.

The Characteristics of Trump’s Foreign Policy

Although there are inconsistencies among the foreign policy principles that Trump espouses, they have been remarkably durable. On September 2, 1987, he paid for an “open letter” to be printed in *The New York Times*, titled “There’s nothing wrong with America’s Foreign Defense Policy that a little backbone can’t cure.” Then, as now, he asserted that Japan, Saudi Arabia, and other countries “should pay for the protection we extend as allies,” and “Tax these wealthy nations, and let America’s economy grow unencumbered by the cost of defending those who can easily afford to pay us for the defense of their freedom.”

In a May 1990 interview in *Playboy* magazine, he was asked directly about how a President Trump would act: "He would believe very strongly in extreme military strength. He wouldn't trust anyone. He wouldn't trust the Russians; he wouldn't trust our allies; he'd have a huge military arsenal, perfect it, understand it. Part of the problem is that we're defending some of the wealthiest countries in the world for nothing.... We're being laughed at around the world, defending Japan...."

Drawing from Donald Trump's campaign and official speeches, the main principles of his foreign policy include:

1. American allies must pay more for their defense. As quoted above and stated innumerable times since, including at NATO summits, the United States must stop shouldering the cost of the military defense of allies. This principle goes beyond negotiating a proportionate share. Trump has said they should reimburse the United States for the total amount that the United States spends in their defense. Anything short of that is a concession rather than a mutually satisfactory outcome in his mind.
2. Maintain American military strength. Working for greater allied contributions does not mean that Trump believes the United States should spend less on defense. He supported \$750 billion in defense spending in the 2020 budget, a significant increase in spending. He has expressed determination that American military strength should be second to none and adequate to deal with any threat. The 2019 National Defense Strategy³ marks a shift away from dealing with terrorism toward increased emphasis on "peer competition" from China and Russia. He emphasizes new technological threats in space and in the cyber realm. He holds a traditional conservative belief that the United States is unmatched in military strength but is also somehow behind and needing to catch up.
3. Trade deficits harm U.S. national interests. Trump believes that trade deficits are damaging to American manufacturing and are the result of either badly negotiated trade agreements or unfair foreign trading practices or both. To correct this situation, he has demanded the renegotiations of previous trade agreements (e.g. NAFTA and the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement), has blocked appointments to the WTO Appellate Body, and has withdrawn the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The only proof that fair trade has been achieved is a rapidly decreasing trade deficit or, preferably, a trade surplus.
4. A world of sovereign nations. Trump told the United National General Assembly in his September 2017 remarks: "There can be no substitute for strong, sovereign, and independent nations, nations that are rooted in their histories and invested in their destinies."⁴ In the 2018 address, he said: "Americans will always choose independence and cooperation over global governance, control, and domination. I honor the right of every nation in this room to pursue its own customs, beliefs, and traditions. The United States will not tell you how to live or work or worship."

Additionally, he stated, “In America, we do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather to let it shine as an example for everyone to watch.”

5. The need to pressure rogue nations. In the same speeches to the United National General Assembly in which Trump was pledging to respect other countries’ sovereignty, he called for “All nations to isolate Iran’s regime as long as its aggression continues. And we ask all nations to support Iran’s people as they struggle to reclaim their religious and righteous destiny.” Trump also called “for the full restoration of democracy and political freedoms in Venezuela,” saying, “The problem in Venezuela is not that socialism has been poorly implemented, but that socialism has been faithfully implemented.” The way he squared the circle of non-interference except in cases of aggression and socialism was to argue that, “The scourge of our planet today is a small group of rogue regimes that... respect neither their own citizens nor the sovereign rights of other countries.”
6. Defend America’s honor. From the time of his 1987 open letter in *The New York Times*, which he concluded with, “Let’s not let our great country be laughed at anymore,” to his 2016 interview in the same newspaper⁵ in which he said, “We have been disrespected, mocked, and ripped off for many years by people that were smarter, shrewder, tougher,” Donald Trump has been fixated on the need for American to not be laughed at. This vehemence of his position on this point raises it above being a foible to being a principle. America’s honor must be defended.
7. Make decisions on a case-by-case basis. Trump said in the March 26, 2016 interview with *The New York Times* that he would not be bound by general principles such as whether he would be inclined to engage in humanitarian interventions, “You know, to help I would be, depending on where and who and what. I’d have to see what’s going on in the region and you just cannot have a blanket. The one blanket you could say is, ‘protection of our country.’ That’s one blanket. After that it depends on the country, the region, how friendly they’ve been towards us.” He made much the same point in his 2018 speech to the General Assembly, using better syntax, “America’s policy of principled realism means we will not be held hostage to old dogmas, discredited ideologies, and so-called experts who have been proven wrong over the years, time and time again.” Trump is free to act without undue regard to dogma or consistency.

Applying Trump’s Foreign Policy to Northeast Asia

All of the countries of Northeast Asia, including China, see the United States under the Trump administration as becoming less predictable, less committed to rules-based systems, and less engaged in the regional and global order. The natural response to unpredictability is to engage in hedging strategies. Along with continuing to manage their still fundamental

bilateral relationships with the United States, traditional U.S. allies in the region are looking toward broader neighborhood collaboration to enhance their security. Korea, Japan, and Taiwan all have new northern or southern policies to strengthen their ties to ASEAN, Australia, New Zealand, India, and other countries. There are limits to these hedging strategies. Current frictions between South Korea and Japan are only an extreme example of the obstacles that will make closer cooperation among the countries of the region difficult.

Apart from the specifics of the Trump administration's policies and the reactions to them by the countries of the region, Northeast Asia provides a venue which invokes the full range of Trump's principles:

Burden sharing is a major issue in U.S.-ROK relations, and negotiations with Japan will follow; the U.S.-Japan Special Measures Agreement (SMA) expires in 2021. Fortunately, for the sake of reaching a satisfactory outcome in the current SMA negotiations with South Korea, Trump's principle is clear – allies must pay more – but his demands are not specifically defined. It may be possible to take into account elements of Korean defense spending that are not within the technical confines of the actual SMA agreement. If South Korea purchases more U.S. weaponry, can demonstrate the cost of its naval operations and other military activities including those not directly related to mutual defense, and can quantify other contributions to the alliance, such as money spent on weapons development, it likely will be able to show that it is “paying more for its own defense” than it did in the past. South Korea's SMA contributions will need to increase, but a smaller increase than the United States demands can be placed in a larger burden sharing context.

Trump's interest in military balances of power, and particularly his concern about future high-tech competition, influences his thinking towards China. His emphasis on military competition in high-technology areas means that he most likely is taking a direct interest in the issue of whether use of Huawei equipment poses a security threat to America's digital infrastructure. The U.S.-China economic relationship also tests his aversion to trade deficits.

Within the Trumpian view of the world, Northeast Asia has the advantage of being unencumbered by regional organizations or collective security pacts. It is closer to his ideal of a system of fully sovereign nations than is Europe with its highly structured European Union and NATO mechanisms. This poses a particular problem for the Japanese government, which believes that only an informal coalition of Asian-Pacific countries, led by the United States, can effectively counter China.⁶ Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and his open disdain for multilateralism run counter to Japan's preferred strategy.

North Korea is a special case within Trump's foreign policy because it fits within his category of rogue nations whose behavior must change, but it also now has the privileged status of being a partner in a negotiation. Rogue nations are exempt from Trump's policy of respecting differences among nations. However, North Korea is also seemingly amenable to Trump's preferred practice of negotiated outcomes – the “Art of the Deal.” So long as North Korea negotiates, it will be seen by Trump as a negotiating partner that must be accorded respect. If the negotiations break down, it will find itself back on the list of “rogue nations” who should expect to be subjected to U.S. pressure.

As will be explained below, Donald Trump's sense of his own and his country's honor is neither superficial nor formalistic. He means it. Moon Jae-in, Abe Shinzo, and Xi Jinping have been prudent in publicly according honor and respect to Trump. He, in return, has praised them, which he assumes will favorably impress them. It is safe for foreign leaders to act dismissively toward other U.S. government officials, but not toward Donald Trump, or toward the United States in general. It appears that Trump associates himself, personally, with American honor. To slight either is to slight both.

Finally, Trump's disregard for agreements struck by prior administrations has effects in the region in addition to freeing him to make his own deals. Chinese officials believe that the Trump administration has forgotten, or is choosing to ignore, the fundamental bargain that was struck between the United States and China decades ago: the two sides would respect each other's systems while expanding their engagement and cooperating when it was mutually beneficial to do so. China was particularly irritated by Secretary of State Pompeo's October 30, 2019, speech in which he said that the United States supports the Chinese people but not the Chinese Communist Party.⁷ Distinguishing between the Party and the people is anathema to the Chinese government's ideology.

Chinese officials have moved away from earlier expressions that U.S. economic pressure would help Chinese achieve necessary reforms and are now fatalistic that the United States will never be satisfied with China's economic model. More optimistically, they believe that Trump – based on his principles – is more interested in trade balances than in structural reform in China. If China purchases enough U.S. goods, that alone will satisfy him.⁸

Taxonomies of American Foreign Policy

The specifics of Trump's foreign policy are closely tied to the varying traditions of American foreign policy, which in turn are rooted in American society and history. Although Trump's tactics are novel, his policies follow historical threads. By all accounts, Donald Trump is not a student of history and does not pattern his policies or behavior on his predecessors, but he did not develop his attitudes on a blank slate. Furthermore, although history does not provide the Trump administration with a pattern to follow, it does give it a mirror in which it recognizes how some of its policies played out in the past. That makes an examination of the past more relevant than it might at first appear.

American foreign policy has undergone major shifts over time from isolationism to global leadership, from anti-imperialism to a flirtation with overseas empires in the case of the Philippines. Academics and commentators have attempted to divide these periods of American foreign policy into schools. Does Trump's foreign policy fit into one of these categories or is it something entirely new? The Trump administration obviously departs from the foreign policy of its immediate predecessors, and is vociferous in asserting that it is doing so, but is it unprecedented in the history of American foreign policy?

Colin Dueck, in his recent book on Conservative Nationalism, *The Iron Age*,⁹ describes three main Republican foreign policy options that emerged post-World War I and which continue to have influence in conservative circles:

1. Nonintervention. This school of thought has a long tradition in American history, but reached its modern peak in its arguments for peace, disarmament, and strict disengagement following World War I. It was the counterweight to President Woodrow Wilson's intention to have the United States lead a League of Nations in order to prevent future wars.
2. Hawkish or hardline unilateralism. Rather than calling for a drawing down of U.S. military budgets, this policy school calls for a strong national defense and muscular responses to overseas threats to American interests, while remaining free of alliances or intervention in foreign disputes.
3. Conservative internationalism. Some Republicans, such as Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, believed in the value of postwar alliances with France and the United Kingdom to keep potential future German aggression in check, but opposed joining international institutions or participating in wide-ranging collective security.

Dueck sees Trump's foreign policy as a descendant of the school of hardline unilateralism. It may be revealing, however, that when journalists Maggie Haberman and David Sanger, in their 2016 *New York Times* interview, pressed Donald Trump to name a period when American foreign policy was "great" – in the sense of his slogan "Make America Great Again" – he pointed with favor to the turn of the century between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as "a pretty wild time in this country...that machine was really based on entrepreneurship." He noted that in the 1940s and 1950s, "we were not pushed around, we were pretty much doing what we had to do." He "really liked Ronald Reagan, but on trade I never felt we did great so it actually would be long before that." It is not the Cold War nor the Greatest Generation that Trump finds the high water mark of American foreign policy, it is the Gilded Age or perhaps even earlier.

In his influential book *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*, from 2001,¹⁰ Walter Russell Mead describes four historic schools of American foreign policy:

1. Hamiltonian: managed by centralized federal agencies, is pro-business, and pragmatic;
2. Wilsonian: determined to spread American values throughout the world;
3. Jeffersonian: concerned that America's domestic affairs and way of life not be affected by the influence of foreign entanglements, and;
4. Jacksonian: a populist school that "believes that the most important goal of the U.S government in foreign and domestic relations should be the physical security and the economic well-being of the American people."

Mead wrote in 2001 that, “Jacksonian opinion is instinctively protectionist, seeking trade privileges for American goods abroad and hoping to withhold those privileges from foreign exports...They see the preservation of American jobs, even at the cost of some unspecified degree of economic efficiency as the natural and obvious task of the federal government’s trade policy.” According to Mead, the Jacksonian school of foreign policy is also “skeptical, on both cultural and economic grounds of the benefits of immigration seeing it as endangering the cohesion of the folk community and introducing new, low-wage competition for jobs.”

Add to that President Andrew Jackson’s restraint in using military force abroad and his prickly sense of honor, and it is no wonder that people close to Donald Trump, including his senior advisor Steve Bannon, began describing Trump’s foreign policy as “Jacksonian” soon after his inauguration.

Jacksonian Foreign Policy

It is worth reviewing the foreign policy of Andrew Jackson, president from 1829 to 1837, not because the Trump foreign policy is modeled upon it but because Trump and his advisors believe that Jackson’s foreign policy mirrors theirs. Examining Jacksonian foreign policy not only helps explain the meaning of Trump’s foreign policy, but doing so may also reveal that the attitudes informing Trump’s policy have deep roots in American history. If Jacksonian foreign policy was an early version of Trump’s foreign policy, Trumpism would be more likely to continue into future administrations, in one form or another.

In an interesting example of scholarship informing policy, Bannon told Mead that it was because of his book *Special Providence* that Andrew Jackson’s portrait had been hung in Trump’s Oval Office.¹¹ Although the tenure of the Jackson administration is not remembered as one of great moment in American foreign policy, this does not mean that Jackson was inactive in foreign policy. To the contrary, he devoted much time and energy to foreign relations. Jackson was very concerned with access to foreign markets for U.S. exports and kept Congress informed of progress on his negotiation of trade agreements with Russia, Spain, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and Siam (Thailand).

In his Fourth Annual Message to Congress of 1832, Jackson noted that although he had made references to other countries’ “domestic disturbances or foreign wars, to their revolutions or dissensions,” he also wanted to make clear that his administration took a direct interest in them only in instances “where those events affect our political relations with them, or to show their operation on our commerce. It is neither our policy nor our right to interfere. Any intervention in their affairs further than this, even by the expression of an official opinion, is contrary to our principles of international policy and will always be avoided.”

Jackson made an exception in the case of an act of piracy against an American trading vessel by inhabitants of Sumatra. In that case, he dispatched a naval frigate to “chastise” the pirates at their base in Sumatra. He explained to Congress in his 1832 Annual Message that if he had been dealing with “members of a regular government,” he would have demanded an explanation, but because “they were a band of lawless pirates,” it was appropriate to act to deter them and others from similar future acts. He stated, “This was done, and the effect has been an increased respect for our flag in those distant seas and additional security for our commerce.” Jackson’s depiction of the “lawless” pirates living outside of the protection

of a nation state, is reminiscent of Trump's description of ISIS members as "a network of lawless savages," also beyond the legitimate jurisdiction of a state.

Trump's foreign policy may be styled as Jacksonian in its emphasis on promoting U.S. exports, espousing non-interference in other countries' affairs while reserving the right to take tough action against non-state actors, emphasis on military strength (Jackson had an aggressive naval construction program), and insistence upon points of honor. On the other hand, what Trump's foreign policy models itself *against* are what conservatives describe as Wilsonian attempts to promote global governance and a world-wide U.S. promotion of democracy.

Wilsonian Foreign Policy

Woodrow Wilson is often characterized and occasionally demonized for his association with the failure of the League of Nations, a league that he had championed after World War I. Its failure to prevent World War II is taken as vindication of the U.S. Senate's wisdom in refusing to ratify a treaty Wilson had presented to join the League in 1920. Wilsonian foreign policy is associated with naïve utopianism and with sacrificing American sovereignty in favor of international rules and institutions. Even his supporters typically portray him as a visionary rather than as a practical statesman. It has not helped Wilson's reputation that he is now also remembered for re-segregating the Federal government during his time in office, walking back the modest steps Theodore Roosevelt had taken to promote racial equality within the government. Born in Virginia in 1856, Wilson never overcame his views on segregation.

In regard to "Wilsonian" foreign policy, Tony Smith makes a compelling case in his 2017 book, *Why Wilson Matters*,¹² that Wilson's liberal internationalism is misunderstood. This matters because Conservative Nationalists juxtapose Trump's "principled realism" with a "liberal internationalism" of Wilson's lineage, tainting by association post-World War II international institution building. In their telling, liberal internationalism may have enjoyed a temporary success in the postwar era due principally to an overwhelming application of U.S. power, but is now faltering because its flawed Wilsonian foundations could do nothing but crumble over time. A world of sovereign nations is the natural order. Attempts to subject them to international governance is perverse and doomed to failure. Donald Trump's foreign policy asserts this truth as self-evident.

On January 8, 1918, almost a year before World War I's end, Wilson gave a speech to Congress in which he laid out his "Fourteen Points," which he described as "the program of the world's peace...our program, and the only possible program." The major innovation of the Fourteen Points was Wilson's objective in Point Fourteen that "A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike." What follows in the language of Point Fourteen is important: "In regard to these essential rectifications of wrong and assertions of right we feel ourselves to be the intimate partners of all the governments and peoples associated together against the Imperialists. We cannot be separated in interest or divided in purpose. We stand together until the end." Wilson's "general association of nations" was, therefore, not intended to be open to all. Rather, it was intended to be a collective security agreement among democracies.

There was vigorous debate during the negotiations of the League of Nations Covenant as to what “any fully self-governing state,” meant as criteria for membership. Great Britain pushed for Indian membership, against firm opposition from Wilson. India was eventually admitted once France obtained British consent to use the term “pays de self-government total” in the French language version of the Covenant.¹³ By consensus, membership was limited to “governments based upon the principle of popular self-government.”

Lest there be any doubt that Woodrow Wilson intended the League of Nations to be a collective security arrangement among democracies, his comments in Minneapolis on September 9, 1919, make it clear: “No nation is admitted to the League of Nations whose people do not control its government. Nobody is admitted except the self-governing nations, because it was the instinctive judgment of every man who sat around the board that only a nation whose government was its servant and not its master could be trusted to preserve the peace of the world.”

Contrary to the criticism that Wilsonian foreign policy was misguided in assuming that all nations could be bound together regardless of their fundamental differences, that was never its intent. Its purpose was to defend democracies in a dangerous world. A second mischaracterization of Wilsonian policy is that it was overweening in its ambition to push American notions of democracy to all corners of the world. In his Eighth Annual Message to Congress of December 7, 1920, Wilson said that there are two ways in which the United States could “assist to accomplish the great object,” i.e. to spread democracy to other countries. “First, by offering the example within her own borders of the will and power of Democracy to make and enforce laws which are unquestionably just.” And, second, “by standing for right and justice as toward individual nations. The law of Democracy is for the protection of the weak, and the influence of every democracy in the world should be for the protection of the weak nation...which is struggling towards its proper recognition and privilege in the family of nations.”

Wilson perceived democracy as a precious but fragile movement that needed protection from the world’s powerful autocracies, not as a tidal force which could sweep all before it if promoted with sufficient aggressiveness. It would prevail in time, but only through example: “The United States is of necessity the sample democracy of the world, and the triumph of Democracy depends upon its success.” Even conservative isolationists could subscribe to that sentiment.

Postwar Liberal Internationalism

What happened to transform Woodrow Wilson’s defensively-minded and realistic foreign policy into the hegemonic and idealistic school of foreign policy for which Donald Trump’s policy is portrayed as a corrective? In a word, events. The United Nations, Breton Woods system, and other postwar institutions are often described as the fulfillment of Wilson’s earlier ambitions, a belated flowering of his tragic failure in 1920. However, the postwar order stemmed from the very different situation that prevailed at the end of the World War II as opposed to World War I. World War I ended in an armistice after a war of staggeringly costly attrition. Even into the 1930s, polling in the United States, which suffered least among the allies, showed that a majority of the public believed that America’s intervention in the war had been a mistake.¹⁴ The United Kingdom and France had been stunned into postwar

policies that made them unable to react to Hitler's rise. Russia had been transformed into the Soviet Union. Wilson was dealing with a depleted international system.

By contrast, World War II ended with a clear victory. The costs had been enormous and civilian suffering unparalleled, but the Axis was comprehensively defeated, and the Allies had the power to create a world of their making. The United Nations and the other postwar international institutions were intended to be universal in a way to which Woodrow Wilson could not aspire. The United Nations Charter enshrined universal values. The moment of postwar relief at having survived and prevailed was brief. It turned out that the Allies were united only in their mutual need to defeat the Axis countries, not in their aspirations for the postwar world. The Soviet Union combined regional hegemony with a revolutionary ideology. China emerged from its civil war with its own revolutionary ambitions.

International Interventionism and the Neoconservative Moment

The new post-Cold War environment has been associated with the phrase "New World Order," famously used by President George H.W. Bush in his September 11, 1990, speech to a joint session of Congress, but it in fact had already been uttered on December 7, 1988, by Mikhail Gorbachev in his speech to the United Nations General Assembly.¹⁵ As in 1945, the new international environment created by the end of the Cold War seemed to hold out the hope of a new era of cooperation and peace. It is unreasonable to blame American foreign policy for the failure of a New World Order. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker were experienced, prudent, and careful to avoid any impression of triumphalism over the collapsed Soviet Union. However, they and the European Union were unable to help guide the Soviet Union into becoming a successful and non-aggrieved Russian state. Perhaps that was never possible.

The Clinton administration's failures during the 1990s to act or not act in the cases of Somalia and Rwanda respectively, and its belated but eventually successful intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina taught either that American intervention worked or did not work depending on who was drawing the lesson. During this period, a neo-conservative movement in the United States fretted that the United States was missing an opportunity to transform the world. Robert Kagan and William Kristol in 1996 called for "...a major increase in defense spending capable of preparing and inspiring the nation to embrace the goal of global leadership. The re-moralization of America at home ultimately requires the re-moralization of American foreign policy."¹⁶ This was Wilsonian foreign policy turned on its head. Rather than working to promote democracy at home for the purpose of inspiring the world, the neo-conservatives were calling for America to launch an international democratic crusade in the hopes that it would inspire morality at home.

The debate on whether and to what extent the United States should engage in humanitarian interventions and democracy promotion might have continued inconclusively except for the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. In the aftermath of 9/11, the American public, uncharacteristically, rejected the need to act as part of an alliance. The United States would not have entered World War I, World War II, or the Korean War except under the imprimatur of an international alliance of democracies. After 9/11, the American public was, at least temporarily, prepared to act unilaterally.

With a motivated American public and a specific cause behind it, that of waging a “global war on terror,” neo-conservatives were able to see their policies implemented in practice. The United States intervened militarily in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003. Making clear the neo-conservative agenda that this would be more than a limited war with limited objectives, President George W. Bush said in a February 26 speech at the American Enterprise Institute that “A new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region.”¹⁷ In his Second Inaugural Address on January 20, 2005, he expanded on his foreign policy’s ambition: “The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world. So, it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, and with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in the world.”

When Barack Obama assumed office in January 2009, he arrived frustrated with the slow pace of progress in Afghanistan and Iraq but found it difficult either to bring the conflicts to a successful end or to withdraw from them. He also found it difficult to abandon the noble goal of promoting human rights and democratization. The Arab Spring of 2010 seemed to provide evidence that ambitions for the post-Cold War era had not been misplaced. Obama adopted some of the language of the international interventionists: “In all we do, we must remember that what sets America apart is not solely our power – it is the principles upon which our nation was founded. We’re a nation that brings our enemies to justice while adhering to the rule of law, and respecting the rights of our citizens. We protect our own freedom and prosperity by extending it to others. We stand not for empire but for self-determination.”¹⁸

A final test of the effectiveness and limits of international interventionism came in Syria. It appeared in 2013 that Bashar al-Assad was soon to be toppled by an internal revolt. His use of chemical weapons against his own people provoked outraged opinion in the United States and Europe. Obama authorized a limited air strike. On September 10, 2013, he explained the strike in terms of international interventionism: “When dictators commit atrocities, they depend upon the world to look the other way until those horrifying pictures fade from memory...The question now before the United States, and the international community, is what they are prepared to do about it. Because what happened to those people – to those children – is not only a violation of international law; it’s also a danger to our security.”¹⁹

By the final two years of the Obama administration, American troops had been engaged in combat in Afghanistan for over a dozen years, and two years after troops had finally withdrawn from Iraq in 2011, Iraq was showing few signs of having become a successful democracy. In 2014, large parts of Iraq were being occupied by ISIS. The situation had deteriorated in Syria and the U.S. had no apparent means or strategy to remove Bashar al-Assad or to prevent a humanitarian disaster. This was the situation in 2016 for which Donald Trump blamed Democratic and Republican administrations alike. He received a sympathetic hearing from the American public.

Enter Donald Trump’s Foreign Policy

The international system Donald Trump inherited in 2016 was not wholly unlike that Woodrow Wilson found in 1919. The world then was recovering from a catastrophic and debilitating war, uncertainties prevailed as to what would come next, and the American

public was looking to “come home” and to have less to do with the world, at least for awhile. Isolationists and non-interventionists were able to defeat Wilson’s plans for a U.S.-led League of Nations, and the Republican Party was split into isolationists, non-interventionists, and a minority of conservative internationalists. Warren Harding won the presidency in 1920 by promising a “return to normalcy.”

Although the world was in far better shape in 2016 than it was in 1919, it had struggled through a long “war on terror” without an apparent victory; Russia was again finding its footing after a fundamental change, this time exiting from its Soviet phase; and the question of how to contain a major, disruptive power – this time China rather than Germany – was on the agenda. Donald Trump campaigned in 2016 using Woodrow Wilson’s description of the world as a dangerous place while at the same time offering Warren Harding’s promise of a “return to normalcy,” or “Making American Great Again” in Trump’s formulation. Trump and Harding both appealed to a war-weary public to look back to better times.

There are novel aspects to Trump’s management of foreign policy. Seeing the first draft of his thoughts by means of Twitter rather than seeing the outcome of a deliberative governmental process is unsettling. It is in a way a credit to Trump’s transparency, once one gets past thinking of presidential statements as laying out thought-through policies. His personalizing of foreign policy by calling foreign leaders “good guys,” “bad guys,” “friends,” or “losers,” also has a pre-modern ring. European monarchs over centuries spent time sizing each other up as individuals before deciding how to act.

However, Trump’s policies, as opposed to his tactics, have roots in American history and society. They are neither the alternative to, nor a repudiation of, a single tradition of American foreign policy called liberal internationalism. Liberal internationalism is a broad term that covers diametrically opposed principles. Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush held very different views and acted in very different ways.

For American voters, the alternative to Trump’s Jacksonian foreign policy is not necessarily a return to liberal internationalism as it has recently been practiced. Other alternatives include: a return to Woodrow Wilson’s defensive alliance of democratic countries; a renewed emphasis on postwar, rules-based international organizations; or an attempt to create a new Cold-War-style balance of power, one hopes less dangerous than the last one. The least likely possibility is a sharp decrease in military spending and isolationism. The American public has shown little appetite for that. In this time of strong partisanship, it is worth remembering that there is no Republican or Democratic foreign policy, only threads of American foreign policy that have woven through successive administrations.

International Reaction to Trump’s Foreign Policy

The main strategy of America’s allies and adversaries has been to hedge against the unpredictability of Donald Trump’s foreign policy. They are uncertain as to when he is acting out of immovable conviction and when he is exercising the “Art of the Deal.” In the case of South Korea, doubts have developed regarding whether the U.S.-ROK alliance is “rock solid” as professed by administration officials, or whether they should take seriously Trump’s statements that he sees no reason why there should be U.S. troops in South Korea. President Trump now says that the U.S. will stand firmly by its allies, but candidate Trump thought it natural that Japan should develop its own nuclear weapons.²⁰

Taiwan and South Korea have particular concerns over Trump's proclivity to prioritize short-term deals at the expense of long-term alliance relationships and over the unpredictability introduced by his negotiating style. Although Taiwan is gratified by arms sales under the Trump administration and the president's personal contacts with Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen, it is also concerned that Trump might make concessions toward China at the expense of Taiwan as an element in a big U.S.-China agreement on trade. On the other side of the Strait, Chinese officials are concerned that although Trump himself would be unlikely to take provocative steps on Taiwan's behalf, his management style is not conducive to tight discipline across the Executive Branch: "Anti-China hawks" within the administration might take pro-Taiwanese steps below Trump's level of attention.²¹

South Korea also has reason to be concerned by Trump's unpredictability. He already demonstrated at the June 12, 2018, Singapore summit that he is prepared to make sudden concessions. Without having laid any public groundwork, he offered to Kim Jong-un in Singapore that the United States would suspend large-scale combined military exercises with South Korea. South Koreans are concerned that Trump, in a future meeting with Kim, might make further concessions without having consulted South Korea, or that he might strike a bilateral deal with China regarding the Korean Peninsula, over the heads of either North or South Korea. Trump has said that he considers unpredictability a negotiating asset, but that widens the scope of other countries' imaginings regarding what he might actually do and what they must, therefore, prepare for.

On the consistency side of the scale, leaders of Northeast Asia's countries are well-aware of Trump's long-term preoccupations with burden sharing and with trade balances. South Koreans have observed that one consequence of this is that no one in the Executive Branch seems to be in a position of overseeing the totality of the U.S.-Korea relationship. They deal with Special Envoy Stephen Biegun on North Korea, with U.S. Trade Representative Lighthizer on trade relations, and with various Defense Department officials on burden sharing negotiations.²² Trump neither represents the United States on the full range of issues, nor does he entrust any one of his officials to oversee the U.S.-ROK relationship. The whole of the alliance is taken less seriously by the Trump administration than the sum of its parts.

America's Asian allies have engaged in a policy of hedging by developing new "northern," "southern," "western," or "eastern" strategies to increase their ties to countries other than the United States. Some have sought to diversify their trade and investment in order to become less vulnerable to swings in American trade policy. America's adversaries, such as Iran and North Korea, seem to have diminished faith that they can negotiate a lasting agreement with the United States. Their hedging tactic, logically, is to strengthen their deterrent capability against a potential future American attack while at the same time exploring diplomatic paths.

Does a study of Trump's foreign policy yield suggestions on how to deal with the United States under his administration? The following suggestions take into account his tactics as well as his policies:

1. Contributions to the shared cost of defense and merchandise trade balances will never be other than primary concerns to Trump. South Korea and Japan should expect these to be fundamental issues and be prepared to deal with them. China may find that any steps it takes to increase American imports may weaken American demands for structural reform.
2. Countries have learned not to be alarmed by excessive initial demands from the Trump administration. These are almost always the opening bid in a negotiation.
3. Although tweets are considered official policy, they often represent a first thought rather than a conclusion.
4. Appeals to treaty obligations, shared histories, or diplomatic tradition have less impact on the Trump administration than they had on previous American administrations. Alliances must appear to be effective ways of dealing with contemporary threats, not as institutions based on tradition.
5. Expressions of honor and respect should be taken seriously, flowing in both directions. Trump expects to be shown personal respect and expects foreign leaders to take seriously his expressions of respect. His praise of Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, and Kim Jong-un are formal honors that show a willingness to make deals with them. The flip side of his aversion to America's being "laughed at," is that he also credits signs of respect. He has frequently alluded to Putin's having called him "brilliant," although the word may have been more accurately translated as "very colorful."²³
6. Countries should take the Trump administration's unconventionality as an invitation to show their own creativity. There is no reason foreign governments should not make unlikely linkages between issues or to make heretofore unreasonable demands on the Trump administration. Reciprocity of behavior may make for more constructive and successful negotiations.
7. Do not assume that Donald Trump's successor will return to the foreign policies of the Obama, Clinton, or Bush administrations. It is more likely that a debate will reemerge regarding the limits and uses of American power. But, it is certain that future U.S. administrations will be forced to respond to events in ways contrary to their stated and intended policies. That, at least, has been a constant.

Endnotes

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