



## The Debate of Change and Continuity in Trump's Foreign Policy

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### Abstract:

Trump's foreign policy outlook and rhetorical predispositions indicate that American foreign policy has undergone significant changes in terms of substance. The arrival of Trump at the helm of affairs had created a conventional perception of a gradual retreat by the United States from liberal internationalism. The Trump administration relied heavily on Jacksonian foreign policy to seek alternative ideas for reinterpreting the United States' role in the current international order. Such a foreign policy pursuit resulted in the rise of A-moral transnationalism, an approach that called into question several key pillars of US international engagement in order to gain short-term economic gains. To that end, this article will examine theoretical and historical aspects of US foreign policy, as well as policy practices implemented by the Trump administration during his four years in office, in order to test claims of continuity or transformation in US foreign policy.

**Keywords:** Donald Trump, US foreign policy, nationalism, neo-isolationism, liberal order

### INTRODUCTION

Every US president promises to avert his predecessor's policies and provide a new vision in order to advance the country's national interests. But how can one tell whether there was a genuine policy shift or merely a shift in rhetoric? A detailed analysis of the foreign policy literature suggests a range of explanations, with the emphasis on whether the policy change is real or figurative. While analyzing Trump's foreign policy's working and strategic approach, one can assume the direction US foreign policy took simply by focusing on Trump's offensive and demeaning behaviour towards other heads of state, while also believing it to be the best way for the US to engage with the world (Beeson, 2020). At the same time, assumptions about the President's behaviour are critical for determining a shift in foreign policy. In order to make sense of Trump's foreign policy shift, one must first define the change and determine how it can be measured, thereby identifying a literature gap in the field of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA).

Observing the FPA gap, Pierson stated that "it is indeed difficult to make an accurate assessment of contending explanations when there is no consensus to explain the outcome" (Ashbee, 2020). Hurst and Ashbee began to address the issue in the international system of Units after identifying a gap in the FPA literature. They developed a frame of reference to identify the change by utilizing the history of institutions, monetary records, and official grants from Karl Polanyi's research (Block, 2003). Hurst and Ashbee's frame of reference is comprised of paradigms, organisations, rationale behaviour, and interests. Using this framework allows for a clear, if not conclusive, identification of

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a change in foreign policy. While addressing the issue of FPA (Ashbee, 2020), this framework also acknowledges that transformation or change does not occur instantly and does not cover the entire spectrum. Rather, the phenomenon of change manifests itself in different dimensions, at different times, and at different speeds. Though it slows the process of detecting the change, it also aids in understanding why the outcome of each change is unique.

### **An Overview of US Foreign Policy before Trump's Era**

During his presidency, Donald Trump triggered a major debate among scholars, critics, and academics in the field of international relations, expressing concern about the future of American foreign policy (Nye, 2019). The more important question that remained unanswered during Trump's presidency was whether the United States would maintain its commitment to liberal internationalism. Regardless of the term "liberal," US policy has no preference for either Democrats (liberals) or Republicans (conservatism). All in all, the "Liberal" in liberal internationalism represents two values: the promotion of freedom, human rights, open media, liberal democracy, and an open market economy (Jahn, 2018). As a result, it is not surprising that a multitude of articles and books have been written to explain what Donald Trump meant for US foreign policy and whether the US will abandon liberal internationalism. Few scholars argue that adhering to liberal internationalism is detrimental to the United States during these times of transition (Chaudoin, 2018). As a result, Washington should withdraw its forces from foreign lands, pursue economic independence policies, and maintain an inward focus.

Despite all the positive aspects of these policies, it is difficult to determine whether they can guarantee peace and security in the long run for such a short period of time. With China and Russia as new regional powers, the United States lacks leverage and options over the market economy and allies. The majority of the issues that Trump administration has committed to resolving are due to changes in the international system, while the remainder are for domestic reasons (Chaudoin, 2018). Prior to Trump, no other administration questioned the US's role in preserving and consolidating the current international liberal order.

The main assumption was that it was beneficial to both American security and prosperity, as well as global stability (Duncombe, 2018). They argued that future American leaders should continue to invest in the liberal rule-based order, supporting free trade, multilateralism, democratic diffusion, and contributing to the security of allies and partners. The presence of legitimate differences of opinion and partisan division can be considering relevant issues such as when and if to use force, the extent to which friendly nations should be supported, and how to strike a balance between interests and democratic principles (Posner, 2017). However, during the post-Cold War era, the existence of an international consensus based on liberal internationalist principles effectively isolated the voices of those who believed that maintaining and deepening the current international rule-based orders was not in the best interests of the United States. Trump's victory marked an unexpected and largely unanticipated eclipse for mainstream liberal internationalism. Whereas the majority of critics and analysts did not predict the outcome of the election or the possibility of a radical shift in US foreign policy, several studies had shown signs of a progressive deterioration of the domestic foundations of America's post war period grand strategy (Posner, 2017).

Donald Trump, for the most part, bought into the conservative decline narrative, which served as a foundation for his threat perceptions. He emphasized the importance of putting “America First” in its dealings with the rest of the world, and he drowned out parallels between excessive liberal or globalist ambitions and America's domestic and international challenges (Hill, 2020). The Trumpian trope of overextension has several distinct but interconnected variants. Economic overstretch resulted in problematic capital outflows, a global imbalance of trade surpluses, “unfair” free-trade agreements, and suffocating climate-change regulations, all of which were potentially detrimental to the US foreign policy (Hill, 2020). There was a sense that the US was living beyond its means by trying to squeeze its military resources too thinly. Contemplate Trump's remarks about the need for more equitable burden-sharing in NATO.

### **TRUMP'S OFFENSIVE ON LIBERAL ORDER**

Robert Kagan correctly predicted that “The United States is now out of the world order business” just days after Trump's election victory (Miller, 2019). This article explains Trump's offensive on a pillar of the liberal international order that his predecessors spent decades building by arguing that his relatively high belief in his ability to control events, combined with his extremely high distrust of other people, encouraged him to challenge the constraints imposed by international agreements in a variety of policy areas. Future research could assess the generalizability of these findings by examining Trump's approach to other international agreements, such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), the United States-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS-FTA), and NAFTA, as well as his atypically adversarial behaviour toward long-standing US allies such as Canada and Germany, and his public reverential attitude toward the traditional adversaries such as the Russia and North Korea.

The president's personality traits are unquestionably not the only plausible explanation for his approach to international agreements. Among others, Elliot Cohen (Fitzsimmons, 2020) proposes an ideological explanation, arguing that Trump's hostility toward international agreements is part of a consistent but deeply misguided foreign policy vision that is distrustful of US allies, scornful of international institutions, and indifferent if not outright hostile to the liberal international order that the US has sustained for almost eight decades. Critically, Cohen contends that Trump was the most powerful of many supporters of these ideas (Cohen, 2019). This article does not seek to refute this line of thought. To attribute Trump's decisions to his favorable reception of this ideology, however, is to focus on a symptom of his personality. As this article demonstrates, the president's strong belief in his ability to control events, combined with his extreme distrust of others, predisposes him to accept ideas about how to conduct American foreign policy that validate and reinforce his long-held worldview about how he should have behaved in all aspects of his life. The election of President sparked significant debate in international relations academic circles, with two opposing viewpoints. According to the dominant liberal perspective, Trump has trampled on all liberalism's principles during his reign (Nye, 2019) and re-established the earlier principles of realistic tradition, as well as defined America's role in the world based on tenants of classical realism (Walt, 2018).

According to Landler, a New York Times journalist, “due to (former President) Donald Trump, the world today sees the United States in a different light, from a country enriching the foundations of the current international system to a country that is unpredictable and illiberal” (Landler,2018).

The above-mentioned liberal viewpoint is one that favours Democrats. As a result, those instances in which the US acted unilaterally, circumventing global norms of adhering to both international law and international organizations, were also completely ignored. To cite a few examples from American history, in 1955: Ngo Dinh Diem, a Vietnamese political leader (Oxford), who later became Vietnam's President, was backed by the US during his rule and was later assassinated in 1963 with the help of the US; In 2003: attacking Iraq on a false claim of possessing WMD and other missiles (Zoroya, 2019); In 2011: overstepping on UN resolutions in Libya as the military action conducted by coalition forces was against international law (Booth, 2011). When viewed through the lens of human rights, the extended US practice of renditions and locations such as Guantanamo exposes the hypocrisy of the US-created, rule-based international order (Moraes, 2020).

According to this logic, Trump's presidency was an act to atone for America's transgressions of the previous seven decades. As the majority of scholars, journalists, and experts, particularly in the liberal camp, remember Trump's presidency as the one who mutilated the foundation of liberal internationalism, sabotaged the structure of international organizations, and is solely responsible for America's eventual downfall. However, when looked at objectively (ignoring the liberalist smear campaign against Donald Trump), Trump was most likely the last in a long line of US Presidents who have victimized United states. However, because of his presence, American policymakers were able to recognize and highlight areas in which American policy needed to change.

#### **EVIDENCE SUGGESTING CHANGE IN US FOREIGN POLICY DURING PRESIDENT TRUMP'S ERA**

Towards the end of World War II, the victorious sides agreed to create a comprehensive global order characterized by open markets, transnational institutions, defence cooperation, and shared values. The liberal international order had already ruled the world for the past seventy years. According to Ikenberry, the foundation of the liberal order began to shift when Trump was declared the winner of the 2016 elections. "For the first time in a long time, Americans have chosen a president who is hostile to the international liberal order" (Ikenberry, 2018).

However, it turns out that many conservative Americans rejected the core principles of Liberal Internationalism long before Trump was elected President of the United States. As a result, it is critical to understand how much liberal internationalism continues to remain in the world in 2016. Since 1970, the beliefs of elite policymakers in the United States have shifted toward a course that benefits only the elite individuals. Moving in opposite directions, both major US political parties attempted to uphold some tenants of liberal internationalism during their respective administrations, while ignoring many other principles (Lacatus, 2020). While the Democrats denied and refused to use coercion as a foreign policy tactic, the Republicans withdrew from the cooperative aspects of Liberal internationalism, particularly the multilateral institutions and foreign aid programmes, which were impeding the US from achieving its national interests. Even if the all-encompassing conservative internationalist character of Republican foreign policy remains (endorsing unilateralism and high defence spending), Trump's vision for US foreign policy represents a shift. Trump proposed a nationalist order that is based on five distinct principles (Restad, 2020). Donald Trump has demanded that the United States change its post-World War II foreign policy course.

The unfulfilling foreign engagement of the United States in recent decades has been a major driver of this shift. In this context, Trump's presidency appears to provide an appropriate alternative for American foreign policy, one that seeks to benefit not only American elites but also the larger American people. The first principle seeks to establish Americans as a distinct nation with a well-defined ethnicity, as opposed to the old ideals of diverse nationalities as the primary component. Steve Bannon, who served as President Trump's chief strategist in 2017, stated, "the core principle of our belief is that Americans are a nation with a well-equipped economy, not an economy residing in the international market place, with open access and borders, but a nation with a prominent culture" (Hawkins, 2020).

The second component depicts a nationalistic image in which all nations compete against one another in an anarchic world, limiting levels of cooperation and collaboration. The word "competition" appeared nearly 18 times in the NSS-2017, and the contextual understanding of this type of competition only exists in a zero-sum game; a game in which America is unquestionably losing. Trump expressed his desires for American foreign policy in his inaugural speech, saying that "Americans have helped other countries become rich, while the strength, wealth, and assurance of the United States has burned away" (Miller, 2019). The third principle is to take up the grievances of both the populist and nationalistic masses against globalism, while rejecting the elitist label of Davos. In Trump's words, a globalist is "someone who wishes the global to perform well while caring nothing for our own country." One of Trump's campaign ads criticized the overarching structure of global power for displacing the American working class with international organizations and industries" (Miller, 2019).

The rationale for this flow stems from the global market economy and the ebbs and flows of trade, which should primarily be subjected to national boundaries and serve the national interest. The market should be tightly regulated and organized. The multilateral economic agreements have forced the United States to give up economic leverage, as evidenced by Trump's contempt for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (NAFTA). "Believe me, the United States will have many economic deals, but they will all be bilateral. There is no requirement for a mash pot" (MacDonald, 2018). Such a viewpoint dismisses the concept of cooperative trade agreements in a liberal world, which has been a standard procedure since the Cold End of World War II. Eventually, there is the incorporation of moral insight and the adoption of a sense of direction that involves neither the liberal institutionalist nor the international conservative—whether advocating for a shining city on a hill or displaying a democratic Iraq. Instead, Trump rejected the idea of regime change in order to promote democracy around the world. In light of this, Trump stated, "America is not here to tell people how to live, what to do with their lives, or who to idolize" (MacDonald, 2018).

### **The Continuity of Old Policies during Trump's Administration**

While commenting on Trump's inaugural address, American traditional conservative pundit Charles Krauthammer stated, "Trump's vision for America represents game theory thinking, because for long the US has been providing the world and the world has been exploiting and feeding on US" (Krauthammer, 2017). The Trump-promised revolution did not occur, and the majority of policies implemented during the Trump administration were consistent with the long-held narrative. Trump's dismissal of NATO as obsolete and ineffective did not deter the US

administration from taking preventive measures against any potential threat (Benitez, 2019). Furthermore, Trump's remarks to NATO allies demanding an equal share of burden sharing and increased defence spending were consistent with previous presidencies.

The Ukraine issue remains stalled, while Trump's eagerness to reestablish American relations with Russia has come to a halt due to domestic pressures, which have been exacerbated by the investigation into Russia's alleged role in the US election, which resulted in Trump's victory (Burns, 2019). Similarly, Trump's Middle East policy represented continuity in nearly all areas (Tierney, 2019): Trump, like Obama, sought to collaborate with Russia to combat ISIS and the Syrian war. Neither the Trump administration nor Iran withdrew from the nuclear agreement, despite exerting significant pressure on Iran to renegotiate the terms of the agreement (Wolfsthal, ed, 2020). The same outcome was predicted when the US advised China to put pressure on North Korea and bring them to the negotiating table (Sen, 2020).

In terms of containing China, Trump has consistently targeted China in his speeches and tweets, expressing his outrage at Chinese policies that continue to undermine American influence around the world. However, no concrete steps were taken to correct the situation (Leonard, 2020). The US-China relationship experienced a brief period of disruption as Trump engaged China in a trade war before succumbing to external pressures. There are a number of possible reasons why Trump's campaign promises of "change" were not fulfilled. For example, while the President of the United States wields considerable power and authority and has sufficient flexibility in directing the country's foreign policy, he is not completely autonomous. During his presidency, Trump was thwarted by an obstinate Congress, which resented their president to a large extent—for example, in the case of reestablishing friendly relations with Russia, Trump's effort was hijacked on the premise of an investigation conducted against Russia and its meddling role in American politics (Rourke, 2021). Another issue was Trump's staff and cabinet members. To carry out his perceived vision, Trump needed a team that shared his vision and was willing to commit to making it a reality. Despite the fact that Trump handpicked his cabinet and staff, they did not share Trump's vision and saw it as disruptive. Mike Pence, James Mattis, McMaster, and Rex Tillerson have all written about America's dire situation (Martin, 2017). Each of them accepts and supports the traditional line of narrative and values regarding the American role in the world, which is translated as, the US is a virtuous leader that upholds international law and is the granter of global peace, who keeps potential challengers to the existing system (such as China and Russia) at bay by containing their efforts and influence, and who can provide aid and rescue to the entire global community.

## **CONCLUSION**

The debate over whether American foreign policy changed during Donald Trump's presidency or whether Trump followed the old patterns of continuity has evidence in both camps. Nonetheless, these debates agree to disagree on formal and informal policy issues, the president's intense use of rhetoric, and the president's adherence to official state documents and actions. Since the entire world has witnessed Trump's obsessive use of rhetoric to convey his message, while also acknowledging that Trump's rhetoric is unlike that of any other US president, both in terms of style and substance. Thus, the main point of contention is whether one should focus on Trump's rhetorical speeches or the actions taken by his administration. Those who value the use of rhetoric in the study of foreign policy have expressed concern about Trump's perception, which indicates a

classic case of a zero-sum game between the US and the rest of the world. Since Trump has used presidential rhetoric to withdraw the United States from its assumed role in the world and present a role for the United States that is suited to its own interests, the existing norms and objectives of the current international system have been undermined. While the opposing camp, which relies on hard evidence and actions taken by Trump during his administration, has stated that while Trump's words may convey a different sentiment, his administrative actions are consistent with previous foreign policies. While providing examples, they showcase the outcry over burden sharing in NATO, whereas Trump was seen increasing US military presence in Eastern Europe and conducting extensive military deals with each state individually. Another example was the trade war between China and the United States, which dominated global news for a time before fading away.

However, a reasonable assumption holds that if there has been no significant change in US foreign policy other than a shift in rhetoric, then those are the areas where significant changes must be made by US policymakers. According to those who believe Trump has not revolutionized US foreign policy, the world, particularly US allies, should be concerned. Even if there is no revolution, Trump has instilled in the American people a sense of realization about America's role in global affairs, as a generous contributor to the world and defender of global peace and stability, while simultaneously undermining its own interests for the benefit of others. And today, the discontented American people are asking why the US should spend billions of dollars to bring stability to various parts of the world, why use American resources and its military for goals that go beyond the US's territorial concerns. The ostensibly new Trump era was supposed to be a repudiation of America's commitment to global institutions in favour of realism principles that prioritize nation building. Trump hoped to reshape America's global vision by narrowing it and maintaining its focus on domestic issues while redefining the terms of US engagement in world affairs that are dominated by the spirit of America first. Trump's political journey began with echoes of change and transformation in America's foreign policy toward all external aspects. However, being the president of the most powerful state does not guarantee that change will take place. Caught in the bureaucratic binds of institutions, as well as resistance from domestic and external factors, Trump's ambitious drive dwindled over time, forcing him to follow the set policies of previous presidents.

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