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## The 2016 Presidential Election in the United States and the Resurgence of "American Nationalism" in Foreign Policy Decision-making

### Abstract

The author analyzes the resurgence of "American Nationalism" in the context of Donald Trump's electoral victory in November 2016. He argues that elections of 2016 have underscored that the United States may be charting a course in which it increasingly pursues its national interests autonomously from the global networks and relationships that had characterized U.S. foreign and national security policies since the conclusion of World War II. In this view, U.S. foreign policy should become an extension of domestic politics and should be assessed primarily in what it delivers to Americans, not to the world community or to the neoliberal internationalist order. For the American public, the high expectations for America that they associated with the ethos of the exceptional nation clashed with the perceived loss of international stature and strength following the cold war and dissemination of the neoliberal internationalist order. From this perspective, America's allies were no longer reliable friends, our position in the world was deteriorating, our communities were falling apart, the world was becoming increasingly hostile, and our future promised more of the same. In essence, presidential candidate Donald Trump found a ready audience in his arguments that U.S. foreign policy was a complete failure, that integration in the world was a loss for the country, that America was disrespected in the world, and that it was imperative for the country to turn itself around. President-elect Trump's vision of an American Nationalist foreign policy, suggests that the United States will be devising different rules, pursuing different objectives, and employing different tools than in the past.

Key words: United States of America, foreign policy, nationalism, exceptionalism, international order.

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## Introduction

The election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States promises to have significant implications on how the United States conducts its foreign policy and how the U.S. defines and prioritizes its national interests to respond to changes in the global environment. The elections of 2016 have underscored that the United States may be charting a course in which it increasingly pursues its national interests autonomously from the global networks and relationships that had characterized U.S. foreign and national security policies since the conclusion of World War II.

This new self-conceptualization of America's role in the world, increasingly referred to "American Nationalism", did not suddenly appear fully formed in 2016. In fact, this movement towards jettisoning America's internationalist foreign policy had been steadily strengthening among voters since the election of President Bush in 2000. While the administration of Barack Obama endorsed and promoted the retention of the post-war international order, pressures from the American public to reassert American power and disentangle the U.S. from international controls intensified during his years in office. For example, recent public controversies in the U.S. over the government's policy on climate change, the Iran nuclear deal, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, responses to terrorism in Syria and Iraq, refugee policy, the Trans Pacific Partnership, cyber attacks, and drone strikes indicated the extent to which public resistance to the continuance of America's self-defined global leadership role had strengthened.

In 2016, Donald Trump's candidacy unabashedly rejected the tenets of American internationalist foreign policy and dramatically expanded the scope of the U.S. public's dissatisfaction with America's role in the world. It gave voice and legitimacy to those who argued for an abandonment of the post-war internationalist order that had been painstakingly constructed over the last half century. Without warning and with incredible force, much of the foundation of U.S. foreign policy was under siege (Brands and Feaver 2016). This included questioning of continued U.S. support for the global network of alliances, such as NATO; compliance with various multi-lateral trade agreements, such as NAFTA; participation with multi-lateral organizations, such as the UN and International Monetary Fund; international standards of behavior in the

conduct of war such as torture and treatment of foreign nationals; and the long-term dependability of U.S. promises and treaty obligations to foreign governments. Surprisingly to both the U.S. foreign policy establishment and the world community, large sectors of the American public, if not the majority of the public, endorsed these “extreme” positions as necessary and desirable ways to protect and promote American’s national interests on the way to make America great again.

While it is highly unlikely that the United States under President Trump will abrogate its alliance treaty commitments, precipitously exit from multi-lateral trade agreements, or abandon its international obligations, it is clear that the period of expansion of global connectivity is over and that questions of U.S. sovereignty and short-term national interest will take a more prominent role in U.S. foreign policy decision-making. To an unprecedented degree since the end of World War II, the American public has expressed a willingness to try something new in world affairs by reasserting the primacy of America’s national interests separate and apart from its international obligations, responsibilities, and constraints.

In this article, I explore why the American public apparently turned against the internationalism that defined U.S. foreign policy for the last seventy years. I also discuss the implications that Mr. Trump’s American nationalist foreign policy and accompanying public support for his new vision will mean for the United States and for much of the current world order, including the Western Balkans.

## **An End to the Post-War Foreign Policy Model**

Since the end of World War II, U.S. foreign policy has characterized itself as the global leader rallying the world’s democracies to create and nurture a political and economic world order in which the U.S. undertakes significant global commercial and security guarantees and responsibilities (Mead 2001). In 2016, however, Donald Trump’s campaign for the presidency demonstrated that the American public’s understanding and foreign policy preferences had turned against the prevailing internationalist order in a number of significant ways, and that support by the public for traditional internationalist U.S. foreign policy had largely evaporated:

- First, in contrast to the opinion of most U.S. foreign policy professionals, many Americans perceived that U.S. foreign policy was in crisis; that the last two decades were a time of failure and lost opportunities; and that the nation needed to act immediately and vigorously to correct and compensate for these losses.
- Second, the American public's experience with globalization and other economic changes in the world were perceived to have worked against America's interests and particularly against the interests of the common man in America.
- Third, the American public distrusted the motives and values of U.S. foreign policy "experts" or "establishment" and believed that they had injured the interests of ordinary Americans by pursuing their internationalist agenda.
- Fourth, the public believed that the priorities of U.S. foreign policy decisions should move away from carrying the burdens and responsibilities of world leadership to promoting and defending more immediate and domestic American interests (Pew Research Center 2016a: 3).

Trump's campaign of American nationalism did much to legitimize this perspective and changed the terms of the debate on foreign policy decision-making in the United States. In this view, U.S. foreign policy should become an extension of domestic politics and should be assessed primarily in what it delivers to Americans, not to the world community or to the neoliberal internationalist order. Rather than promoting the traditional position of the U.S. as a leader of the free world with responsibilities to its allies and friends and with a goal to democratize the world, American Nationalism puts America first. Interstate agreements and cooperation, for example, must work to America's advantage first, and ideological affinity to the U.S. democracy should not necessarily confer substantial foreign policy concessions by the U.S.

## **The Legacy of Cold War Thinking and the New American Nationalism**

Although the American public recognizes that the cold war is over, many have never abandoned the half century way of thinking which the cold war engendered. Many Americans still see the world through the prism of a struggle between two superpowers, a world which was

easy to comprehend, a world which was divided between the “good” and the “bad,” and a world in which the United States and its friends were on the side of freedom and justice, while its opponents stood for all that was corrupt and evil. It was a world in which the U.S. faced an existential threat that justified national mobilization and a unified foreign policy, along with accommodations to the needs of allies and a disproportionate contribution to the collective defense of the free world. For the American public, the construct of the bipolar world of the cold war made foreign policy decision-making relatively simple and clear – America’s primary national interest was to weaken and contain the world communist movement led by the Soviet Union.

Today, twenty-five years after the fall of the Soviet Union, much of the American public still prefers to view the world in the same bipolar way; namely, a world composed of those who support the U.S. in its struggles, and those who are against the U.S. and represent an existential threat to America. At times, the antagonists are terrorists. At times it is Iran, or Russia, or China. The expected, but risky, response, of course, is to resuscitate the logic of the cold war and to call for action that isolates and contains the threat and rallies the democracies for unquestioning support of the U.S. position (Stavridis 2016).

While the United States public continued to embrace the logic of the cold war and its existential threat to the country, much of the remainder of the world, including many of the U.S. closest allies, have moved on and pursued their own national interests separately and autonomously from the agenda of the United States. The grand coalitions invoked by the United States against Al Qaida terrorism in Afghanistan, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Kaddafi in Libya, the Islamic State in Syria, and the proponents of hybrid warfare in the Ukraine generated less and less enthusiasm and support for the U.S. position from America’s allies. At times, significant U.S. allies opposed the U.S. position or stood apart from it (e.g. France and Germany during the Iraq invasion). Meanwhile, in America, many viewed this lack of commitment or opposition by our close allies as a betrayal of trust and a confirmation that the U.S. had no alternative but to stand tall and alone to defend America’s national interest in an increasingly chaotic and hostile world (Pew Research Center 2016: 47-54).

In addition to finding itself increasingly isolated in the world, the United States in the post cold war period discovered that it could act alone, without allied support, and still succeed. In contrast to the cold

war era during which both sides had been restrained and worked to limit the scope of military action or challenges to the status quo, the post cold war experience engendered few such limitations. During the cold war, the logic of mutually assured destruction forced both sides to control their allies and to avoid actions that may lead to war. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the existential threat that it posed, the United States found itself able to engage in military action against much weaker foes without fear of escalation or significant loss of life. It also found that it was able to conduct military action at its discretion without significant constraints from allies or potential adversaries.

The first Gulf War, the civil war in Bosnia, NATO action against Yugoslavia, and Iraq War demonstrated to Americans that the United States could successfully conduct war without relying upon counsel or support from allies and without significant costs in blood or treasure. Military action for the U.S. had few negative incentives; and, in fact, the U.S. learned that it could conduct these operations more efficiently without allies who often acted as a brake rather than a facilitator in these activities.

Inadvertently, the United States military actions after the Cold War created an impression among broad sectors of the American public and political leadership that the United States alone was responsible in carrying the burden of collective defense and in behaving as the guarantor of world order. The impression grew in the U.S. that our allies were “free riders” who profited from the benefits of the defense umbrella provided by the U.S., without contributing proportionately to its maintenance (Hudson 2016). Among much of the American public and many political leaders, there was an expectation that U.S. allies ought not count upon America’s protection if they continued to shirk their financial responsibilities. This was a point that Mr. Trump capitalized upon when he offered only tepid support for NATO and Article V collective defense, and explicitly linked the U.S. guarantee for collective security to an ally’s defense expenditures and financial commitments to the Alliance.

## **The Stress of Globalization and the Spread of American Nationalism**

While the breakup of the post cold war era solidarity contributed to the spread of American Nationalism in the 2016 presidential election, it was the process of globalization and its local dislocations that convinced wide swaths of the American public that the conduct of U.S. foreign policy and its international networks were working against both their personal and community's interests and were directly responsible to their decline. Globalization, as viewed by many Americans, did not bring prosperity to all. In many locales, globalization led to deindustrialization, heightened social tensions, increases in income inequality, unemployment, and the destruction of local communities. More significantly, the consequences of globalization were ignored by the political leadership and large numbers of people felt abandoned by their government and leaders (Poushter 2016).

Despite the promises of universal prosperity from globalization, average Americans saw their factories close and their jobs exported to Asia or Mexico. The public perceived that the country was transitioning to a nation that exported raw materials and imported finished goods. Average real incomes continued to fall, and the jobs that remained paid lower wages and provided fewer benefits. Growth in productivity and income went disproportionately to the very wealthy and those with high technical skills, and the prospects for social advancement for those at the lower rungs of the social ladder steadily declined. For the first time ever, many Americans feared that their children would face a harder life than that of their parents (Lieven 2016: 15).

The distress felt by many Americans was not fully recognized or appreciated by the political leadership. Since 1990, the U.S. Presidents and Congresses have supported globalization legislation, particularly in the forms of multinational trade agreements and the abandonment of protection of home industries. Deregulation and other features of the emerging neoliberal order allowed capital and wealth to move freely across national boundaries in pursuit of lower labor costs and higher profits.

While the export of U.S. jobs and manufacturing capacity to Asia, particularly China, was promoted as a social good and linked to the promise of democratization and international stability, many Ameri-

cans felt that their interests and futures had been bargained away for these ethereal goals. Increasingly, Americans perceived that their economy was in precipitous decline and that China was a major beneficiary of this decline. Since 2011, for example, U.S. public opinion polls recorded that a majority of Americans believed China to be the dominant economic power in the world and that China's economy had surpassed that of the United States (Saad 2016).

In short, the stresses associated with globalization in the United States and the defense of globalization by political leaders as a necessary part of the new international order only served to undercut any support that much of the public felt towards the framework of U.S. foreign policy. Pending proposals such as the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) further highlighted the chasm between the interests of the average American and those of the political leadership. The TPP, in particular, demonstrated to the public that their government and leaders were not only out of touch, but that they were also committed to a foreign policy that they believed weakened America and worked against their community and personal interests.

## **The Ethos of the Exceptional Nation and the Growth of American Nationalism**

America's perceived growing isolation in maintaining global security and the public's sense of abandonment of their interests by the foreign policy decision-makers combined to create an understanding that U.S. foreign policy was flawed and needed to be replaced. In the place of the internationalist foreign policy logic that had dominated U.S. foreign policy since the end of World War II, many Americans gravitated to the American popular mythology of the United States as the exceptional nation with a special mission to set an example for the world.

In this political framework of America's global role, the United States is not just one of many nations, and it does not defer to others. Rather America stands alone and answers to no one. It is the exceptional nation without peer and which unquestionably leads the world. In a 2010 Gallup poll, for example, eighty percent of Americans agreed that the United States had a unique character to be the greatest country in the world, and sixty-six percent agreed that the United States has a special responsibility to be the leading nation in world affairs (Jones 2010).



Among the elements that define America's stature and relationship with the world are the following:

- As a nation, America is number one in the world; it is better than others; and it stands out from others.
- International politics is a zero sum game in which there are those who are winners and those who are losers, and the United States must always be in the ranks of the winners.
- America need not accept criticism from others, and it is not subject to the same failings as others.
- As the exceptional nation, we are the envy of the world's nations and entitled to deference them.

For the American public, the high expectations for America that they associated with the ethos of the exceptional nation clashed with the perceived loss of international stature and strength following the cold war and dissemination of the neoliberal internationalist order. From this perspective, America's allies were no longer reliable friends, our position in the world was deteriorating, our communities were falling apart, the world was becoming increasingly hostile, and our future promised more of the same. In essence, presidential candidate Donald Trump found a ready audience in his arguments that U.S. foreign policy was a complete failure, that integration in the world was a loss for the country, that America was disrespected in the world, and that it was imperative for the country to turn itself around.

Public opinion polls underscored the levels of dissatisfaction with U.S. foreign policy and America's stature in the world. In 2015, Gallup had reported that only 37% of Americans were satisfied with the position of the U.S. in the world while 61% were dissatisfied. In addition, 58% of Americans believed that President Obama was not a respected leader in the world community (Jones 2015). By late 2015, 57% of Americans disapproved of President Obama's foreign policy, and only 41% approved (CNN/ORC Poll 2015).

## **Transitioning from Internationalist Neo-liberalism to American Nationalism**

For the American electorate, the world situation and America's role in it has been a disaster. America supposedly emerged from the cold war as the victor, the U.S. has accumulated scores of new allies, and it has a military unmatched in the world. Nevertheless, America's armed forces

in 2016 are engaged in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, and the nation feels under threat in places ranging from Libya to the Ukraine to the South China Sea. U.S. political leaders promised victory in a global campaign against terror, but the terrorist organizations and theatres of conflict have multiplied beyond recognition. All in all, for many Americans, no end to the chaos is in sight.

U.S. leaders also promised an era of prosperity through globalization and the eradication of trade barriers. However, the results, as seen by the public, have been a flood of imports, a precipitous decline in U.S. manufacturing employment, declining real incomes, and a rush of U.S. businesses leaving the country. Rather than address these concerns, the America's leaders have promoted even more sweeping trade deals in Asia with the TPP and in Europe with the TTIP. These leaders have appeared to be either unaware or unconcerned about public resistance to globalization and the dislocations that it has caused.

Taken together, U.S. foreign policy internationalism and neo-liberal policies created a political climate in which Mr. Trump's populist message could easily take root. For decades, Democrat and Republican administrations advocated essentially identical foreign policies and visions of how the United States should interact with the world. Despite public concerns, they did not question the continued appropriateness of America's internationalist foreign policy, and they paid little attention to the growing popular consternation about it. Mr. Trump, however, applied a new standard – nationalism – a principle which resonated with voters and gave voice to their public concerns. In brief, Mr. Trump has left no doubt that he considers U.S. participation and leadership in the global network that regulates state interactions to be a complete failure and contrary to America's interests, a perspective that is shared by many Americans as well.

The Trump campaign, while not advocating specific policy changes, questioned many of the foreign policy assumptions that guided the nation since the end of World War II. He asked whether alliances such as NATO were still worthwhile and in America's interest. He appeared willing to consider examining if the U.S. could benefit from working with Russia in places such as Syria, and whether it was necessary for the U.S. to challenge Russia's claim to its near abroad. He demonstrated little patience with diplomacy, including acceptance of international protocols and adherence to international law. He rejected limitations on torture when they conflicted with U.S. national interests; and, as in the

Iran deal, he rejected the role of the United States as a world actor that needed to align its interests with those of the world community or its allies. He also appeared to reject the utility of foreign assistance funding, soft power, and anti-nuclear proliferation. He appeared willing to work with and support authoritarian leaders and not be encumbered by concerns over democratization. Simultaneously, he advocated a foreign policy approach that freed the United States from international constraints and which encouraged other nations to chart their own path. Above all, he praised his unpredictability as a virtue and strength in foreign affairs.

### **The Framework of the New American Nationalism in Foreign Policy**

At this point, it is not possible to project what will be the specific foreign policy initiatives of the Trump administration or what will be its priorities. It is possible, however, to suggest that a basic framework has emerged, a framework that is deeply nationalist and with American characteristics.

First, Mr. Trump's has a predilection to conceptualize foreign policy in transactional terms which imply that the Trump foreign policy approach will not be constrained by past diplomatic precedents (Kitfield 2016). Mr. Trump celebrates his unpredictability and believes that his negotiating strength is enhanced by creating uncertainty among those with whom he is negotiating. In negotiations, he will convey a willingness to walk away from an agreement or to seek other partners for an agreement if it suits his goals and objectives. As in a business deal, there is no advantage to be gained by communicating one's preferred position or final deal in advance. For example, while discussions with Mexico regarding border controls or NAFTA are unlikely to result in a wall that Mexico pays for or in the abandonment of the free trade market, the Trump administration may believe that the Mexican authorities would be more likely to agree to substantial concessions that will be more to the U.S. advantage.

Second, Mr. Trump may not feel committed to stand by long-term agreements and treaties that the U.S. has ratified in the past if, in his estimation, they were not in the current interest of the United States or not to the U.S. advantage. In this framework, negotiating from strength, extracting the best deal, and abandoning the static and rule-based in-

ternational system forms the core of President-elect Trump's American Nationalist foreign policy. His apparent willingness to challenge China on the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty despite forty years of precedent, and his openness regarding the collective security guarantees of NATO illustrate that tendency.

Third, Trump diplomacy is likely to view foreign policy decision-making from the perspective of business contacts and to make decisions based upon "gut feeling" rather than a detailed strategic plan. His appointment of General James Mattis as his nominee for Secretary of Defense was ascribed to the favourable first impression that the general made in his initial interview with the President-elect.

Fourth, Mr. Trump tends to have a short-term and segmented perspective, and is most interested in quick and positive results. For example, if Russia's President Putin can be helpful in resolving the terrorist situation in Syria, then Mr. Trump is likely to engage with Mr. Putin on that issue. Nevertheless, cooperation with Russia in Syria does not obligate the U.S. to engage with Russia on other issues where the interests of the United States and Russian Federation do not coincide.

Fifth, a Trump foreign policy is likely to withdraw from a global leadership role on peripheral issues, but to be engaged forcefully when the U.S. is directly impacted or directly threatened. Described as part of the "Jacksonian Tradition," this approach implies a foreign policy with a relatively more limited set of national priorities, but with a more robust response if the national interest or the reputation of the United States is involved (Mead 2016). For example, neither nation building nor the protection of endangered foreign populations is likely to be a priority in the Trump administration. President Trump, unlike his predecessors, is unlikely to invest in complex multilateral partnerships or deep U.S. engagement abroad. Finally, the pursuit of the U.S. national interest will not take a secondary role to the needs of alliances or multilateral organizations.

None of these tendencies for the incoming Trump administration should be considered predictive for how specific U.S. foreign policy will be executed in the coming years. In the real world, unforeseen events happen, leaders change, new priorities emerge, economies evolve, and crises occur. President-elect Trump's vision of an American Nationalist foreign policy, however, suggests that the United States will be devising different rules, pursuing different objectives, and employing different tools than in the past. United States foreign policy, in brief, will become less predictable, and global affairs more risky (Drezner 2016).

On issues related to the Western Balkans, there are some broad-based policy predictions about a Trump administration that we can make based on his comments during the electoral campaign:

- It is open to a fresh start with Russia and President Putin, and he may not worry about limiting any increased business interactions by Russia (e.g. natural gas) in the region.
- It is not committed to further NATO expansion, and is unlikely to push Serbia towards membership in the Alliance, or to invest heavily in Bosnia's potential membership.
- On Kosovo, it is unlikely to push for broadening of Kosovo's sovereignty, as this would unnecessarily antagonize Russia whose support is needed in other sectors.
- It is unlikely to be supportive of continued linking U.S. regional policy to the European Union, or in promoting more trade agreements with them.
- Barring major civil disorder in the Western Balkans, he is unlikely to become heavily engaged in the region or to provide much foreign assistance.

The bottom line is that the Western Balkans is unlikely to be a high foreign policy priority for the Trump administration. There are no critical U.S. national interests involved or threatened in the region, and there is no rationale for a substantive change in U.S. policy. At the same time, Mr. Trump has made no commitment to continue to follow current policy in the region; and, if unforeseen difficulties erupt, he may react to regional events in unpredictable ways. In brief, we just cannot predict what changes, if any, Mr. Trump would bring to the region.

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