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America First and the Populist Impact on US Foreign Policy

Abstract: This article examines the impact of populism on US foreign policy under the Trump presidency. First, the article considers how the framing of America First successfully exploited a long-standing gap between public opinion and the foreign policy establishment in on the extent of American global engagement. Second, the article explores how America First has combined populist anti-elitism with nationalist anti-globalism, establishing hostility towards the liberal international order as its most significant, consistent and politically relevant theme. In its emphasis of Jacksonian unilateralism and neoconservative primacy, America First, at the same time, has promoted a considerable degree of continuity, resulting in a persistent disconnect between populist rhetoric and foreign policy practice. Third, the article concludes that America First has successfully challenged the bipartisan elite consensus on liberal hegemony and the ideological dominance of the foreign policy establishment, significantly widening the legitimate space for debate on alternatives to American grand strategy.

Introduction

The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and the success of Brexit in the EU referendum campaign in the United Kingdom are the most prominent examples of a populist disruption of the status quo in international politics in recent times, which subsequently led to a marked increase of interest in the topic of populism, both in terms of global media coverage and the academic literature on the subject.¹ In the past, populism has predominantly been viewed as domestic political issue in terms of voter mobilization, its impact on liberal democratic systems and the comparisons that can be drawn between populist movements and leaders, with a particular focus on the development of populism in Europe and

Latin America.² Populism and its impact on foreign policy and national security have so far garnered relatively little attention, and there has been few interaction between populism studies and adjacent fields in political science, such as international relations (IR) and security studies that focus on foreign policy.³

President Trump's sustained attacks on key institutions of liberal democracy, political opponents, the Washington 'swamp' and the media; his repeatedly voiced disdain for multilateralism, international organisations immigration and 'globalism'; his emphasis on a transactional view of international relations that prioritizes the national interest of the United States against both rivals and allies and partners; and a highly personalized style of political communication that claims 'I am the only one, who matters', suggest that the ideational repertoire of nationalist populism is a persistent and distinctive element of Trump's political views that should be relevant for the conceptualization of US foreign policy.⁴ Beyond the issue, of how Trump has framed his particular brand of American populism by identifying systemic economic and political failure with the establishment, establishing an antagonistic relationship between corrupt elites and ordinary Americans, and utilizing emotional triggers of fear, anger and resentment, such an analysis needs to consider to what extent populism informs the America First discourse relative to other themes, such as nationalism, realism or protectionism, and how it has affected overall US foreign policy outcomes in praxis.⁵

To this end, the article will progress as follows. First, it will argue that the nationalist populist framing of America First has successfully exploited a long-standing gap between public opinion and the foreign policy establishment in the United States on the extent of US global engagement, while Trump's anti-globalist, anti-immigration and protectionist agenda simultaneously responded to the specific sense of political alienation, economic insecurity and

cultural anxiety felt by predominantly White male non-College educated voters, who form the core of Trump's support base. Relying on a range of public opinion surveys, the article identifies partisan polarization and dissatisfaction of Trump voters with globalization, immigration and demographic change as significant elements of popular support for America First's anti-establishment and anti-globalist messaging. Second, the article examines how on the discursive level America First has combined populist anti-elitism with nationalist anti-globalism, establishing hostility towards the liberal international order as its most significant, consistent and politically relevant element. However, while anti-globalism informs both Trump's protectionism and anti-immigration policies, at the same time, there is a disconnect between the nationalist populist rhetoric of systemic change and US foreign policy outcomes, as the United States under Trump continues to broadly support a grand strategy of American primacy with a traditional neoconservative emphasis on national sovereignty and military supremacy that promotes a considerable degree of policy continuity. As such, America First can neither be classified as a coherent Trump Doctrine, nor as a realist strategy of restraint or offshore balancing.

Third, the article argues that the most significant impact of Trump's populism has been on the ideational level, both regarding global perceptions of the international leadership role of the United States and its diminishing reliability and credibility, and in boosting the internal debate on the future of US foreign policy and the viability of restraint as a strategic alternative. America First has challenged the dominant position of liberal hegemony and the political hegemony of the foreign policy establishment by publicly legitimating and partially executing an alternative conceptualization of America's role in world politics that broke with over seven decades of bipartisan consensus on the necessity and desirability of American leadership of a liberal international order.

Populism, US Foreign Policy and the Public Opinion Gap

Populism has notoriously been difficult to precisely define and categorize, with some authors casting it as an essentially contested or fragmented concept.⁶ The political theorist Ernesto Laclau, for example, characterized the ‘vagueness and imprecision’ of populism as ‘essential component’ of its operation, given the necessity to subsume a complex social reality of competing political claims and antagonistic relationships under a homogenous identification of the ‘people’.⁷ Populism as a result is not a fixed, coherent and consistent ideological belief system on how to order social relations or initiate political and institutional reform, but a relatively flexible political mode that can adapt to the particularities of national contexts and specific economic grievances and cultural anxieties in the name of reclaiming popular sovereignty. At its core, populism operates as a rhetorical device or discourse that separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and the ‘the corrupt elite’ that have betrayed them.⁸ An idealized community of ‘hard-working, God-fearing, patriotic citizens’ is represented as only legitimate carrier of popular sovereignty, which in turn has its sole political representation in the figure of the populist leader, party or movement, bypassing the institutional constraints of liberal democracy.⁹ As Jan Werner Muller has summarized this anti-pluralist and anti-liberal quality of populism: “Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people.”¹⁰ Nationalist populism in particular designates a nativist conceptualization of the people as ethno-cultural *gemeinschaft*, an exclusive national community of shared origin and destiny, both separated against the nefarious elites ‘above’ as those unwanted outsiders from ‘below’, while hailing the inherent superiority of the heartland, its people, and the nation they embody.¹¹ Nativism or ‘xenophobic nationalism’ has been a hallmark of Donald Trump’s populist rhetoric from the beginning, regularly dehumanizing immigrants as ‘vermin,’ ‘infest’ and ‘animals’, while designating immigration from majority

Muslim countries as a national security threat.¹² Beyond an analysis of populism as a top down phenomenon, as self-serving manipulation of the public by charismatic *caudillos*, however, successful mobilization requires confirmation and substantiation of populist discourses ‘from below’, whether in the forms of chants of ‘lock her up’ and ‘build the wall’ at Trump rallies, the multiplication of populist messaging via Twitter and social media, or the affirmation of populist policy positions in public opinion polls, national elections and plebiscites that confirms the populist framing of political issues.

Several studies conducting public opinion survey research have suggested that there is widespread general acceptance of populist attitudes among populations in Western countries regarding a Manichaeian view of politics, the necessity to reclaim popular sovereignty, and a belief in a corrupt elite, including in the United States.¹³ However, for such latent popular sentiments of anti-elitism and people-centrism to become activated, both the framing of political and socio-economic grievances by populist figures and political entrepreneurs and a context of failed political representation are required.¹⁴ In advanced economies and mature democratic systems such as the United States, where clientelism and endemic corruption are less likely to be the cause of mass dissatisfaction with the political system, failure of representation occurs when voters feel that their legitimate concerns and grievances are no longer effectively responded to by the existing mechanisms of democratic government.¹⁵

Both partisan polarization and public sentiments regarding the unresponsiveness of the American political system and its parties have steadily increased since 2010, reaching a highpoint previously seen in the mid-1990s, when the nationalist populist Pat Buchanan sought the presidential nomination for the Republican Party and the populist Ross Perot won 20 per cent of the national vote in 1996.¹⁶ In the words of Trump’s campaign manager and

White House chief strategist Steve Bannon, Trump voters were disillusioned from a ‘rigged system’ that had let them down and primarily served the interests of a privileged few.¹⁷ Partisan polarization resulted in an American electorate that was increasingly divided between ideologically opposing camps.¹⁸ Voter coalitions were separated by race, gender, level of education and socio-economic status.¹⁹ The Republican coalition was predominantly made up of White, male, and older voters with a mid-level education and living in rural or suburban areas, while the Democratic coalition consisted of ethnic minorities, college-educated voters, urban populations and women.²⁰ In Donald Trump’s White working-class voter base in the South and the Mid-West popular attitudes on immigration, the economy and the general direction of the country were diametrically opposed to those of Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party, expressing above average scores in categories such as nativism, sentiments of anger, mistrust of the federal government, and economic pessimism among others.²¹

67 per cent of Trump voters, for example, thought that free trade agreements had been bad for the United States, while 58 per cent of Clinton supporters held the opposite view before the election.²² An even greater number of 69 per cent agreed that immigrants were a burden on the United States because ‘they take our jobs, housing and health care’, while only 47 per cent of non-Republicans agreed.²³ Other figures showed that over 80 per cent of Republicans supported construction of an US-Mexican border wall, an issue that had become totemic for President Trump’s restrictive approach towards immigration and border security, while a clear majority 85 per cent of Democrats opposed it.²⁴ Trump voters expressed a combination of political alienation, economic insecurity and cultural anxiety tied to the impact of globalization, changing demographics and immigration that were as much about questions of identity as they were about material concerns.²⁵ Despite positive macro-economic indicators of economic growth and low unemployment in the United States following the recovery from the 2008

financial crisis, Trump voters' subjective perception of their own economic situation and social status was one of relative deprivation and decline and loss of overall societal relevance and cultural hegemony.²⁶

As the economist Joseph Stiglitz has commented, the benefits of globalization were distributed unevenly between 'winners', such as advancing economies in Asia and the global 1% of income earners and the 'losers', the middle and working classes in advanced economies in the West, which had seen little to no real-time income gains for decades.²⁷ Economists Shushanik Hakobyan and John McLaren found that while the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a main target of Trump's populist rhetoric against 'bad deals', had produced overall modest effects for most US workers, an important minority had suffered substantial income losses as a result of outsourcing and the decline of manufacturing jobs.²⁸ It was these 'losers' of globalization in the United States that Trump would speak to in the 2019 State of the Union address: "I have met the men and women of Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, New Hampshire, and many other states whose dreams were shattered by the signing of NAFTA."²⁹ Popular discontent with the status quo opened the space for Trump's populist messaging that combined disdain for the Washington establishment 'swamp' with promises of a national revival and renewal ('Make America Great Again') through economic protectionism, aggressive deregulation, and strict anti-migration measures together with a transactional focus on prioritizing US interests in international affairs.

On issues of foreign policy and national security specifically, Trump's nationalist populist rhetoric of establishment failure and restoring national greatness responded to a long existing gap between public opinion and elite attitudes on American global engagement, - from military intervention to free trade.³⁰ Since at least the end of the Cold War, the US foreign policy

establishment continuously promoted a strategic vision that legitimated military interventions abroad, supported the unrivalled, global supremacy of American power and influence, and sought the country's enduring hegemony in the international system. In following a grand strategy of liberal hegemony, the United States aimed to use its political influence, military power and economic weight to deter potential aggressors and preserve regional stability, foster the global spread of democracy, uphold the international rule of law, and guarantee free trade and open access to the global commons in support of a globalized economy.³¹ Liberal hegemony entailed both the primacy of American power that was to be perpetuated, and an activist political leadership role in support of Western liberalism, reflecting a deeply held and widely shared bipartisan elite consensus on American exceptionalism.³²

Data from the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR), which publishes a regular public opinion survey on Americans' perspective of US foreign policy reveal that from 1974 to 2018 between 66 and 70 per cent of Americans supported an active role of the United States in world affairs; a relatively stable figure for over four decades that nonetheless reveals a significant gap when compared to foreign policy leaders who nearly unanimously endorsed internationalism and active US leadership in world affairs.³³ This discrepancy between the Washington elite consensus on liberal hegemony and public opinion was again reconfirmed in 2013, when a much-reported Pew research poll showed that 52 per cent of Americans agreed with the statement that the 'United States should mind its own business internationally'.³⁴ This was the highest percentage of popular support for what mainstream media and US foreign policy experts would describe as dangerous and irresponsible 'isolationism' since 1964. Although support for 'isolationism' declined to 43 per cent in 2016, 70 per cent of Americans polled still demanded a greater focus on domestic issues over foreign policy and 57 per cent agreed the US should 'deal with its own problems and let other countries deal with their problems the best

they can'.³⁵ On the issue of globalization, 49 per cent of Americans thought that involvement in the global economy was disadvantageous because it lowered wages and cost jobs.³⁶ This again differed sharply from nearly unanimous elite support for further economic liberalization. Nearly three in four members of the Council on Foreign Relations, one of the most prestigious institutions of the foreign policy establishment in the United States, for example, thought that American companies moving overseas would be mostly beneficial for the US economy, while only 23 per cent among the general public agreed.³⁷ In articulating America First as a nationalist populist vision of anti-globalism and anti-elitism Trump could thus mobilize a long-standing disconnect between elites and public opinion on the degree of US global engagement generally, while polarizing issues such as opposing free trade, or fortifying the US-Mexico border were simultaneously addressed to a particular voter segment of predominantly White working class voters, whose views on foreign policy and economic issues were not represented at the elite level, and who were overall more hostile toward globalization, internationalism and immigration than mainstream American society.

Framing America First: nationalist anti-globalism and populist anti-elitism

When Trump first outlined his America First approach in detail in a campaign speech in April 2016, he focused on four core premises about America's role and position in world politics: (1) the overextension of US engagement and existing foreign commitments; (2) the necessity for greater burden-sharing with allies and partners; (3) opposition to the Iran nuclear 'deal' and the rebuilding of trust with Israel and Saudi-Arabia, who had opposed the Obama administration's Iran policy (4); and the restoration of respect for the United States and its power and influence abroad.³⁸ Trump outlined a strategy that would get the United States 'out of the nation-building business' and instead refocus US efforts on counter-terrorism and the

defeat of Islamic State. To restore America's reputation and global influence, its 'military dominance' would be rebuilt through increased defense expenditures after the Obama-era budget sequester, while Trump would seek to reframe relations with China and Russia and renegotiate existing arrangements with US allies and partners, from NAFTA to NATO. As one commentator put it: "Trump's pronouncements may have lacked coherence, but the central message was clear: (...) America needed a radically different grand strategy."³⁹

Overall, Trump's strategic premise was anti-globalist rather than isolationist in nature. In supposedly prioritizing the economic interests of the American people, attacking the dismal failure of the collective (neo)liberal/(neo)conservative foreign policy establishment, and establishing a Manichean distinction between the people-centric approach of 'America First' and the 'false song of globalism', Trump charted a foreign policy course that directly linked populism, nationalism and realism. As Trump declared in his speech at the United Nations in 2017, he was opposed to liberal internationalism, because globalization, trade liberalization, multilateralism and international institutions were hurting ordinary Americans:

For too long, the American people were told that mammoth multinational trade deals, unaccountable international tribunals, and powerful global bureaucracies were the best way to promote their success. But as those promises flowed, millions of jobs vanished and thousands of factories disappeared.⁴⁰

Trump's worldview cast the realm of international politics and external relations almost exclusively as one of existential threats, escalating danger and aggressive economic competition, a zero-sum game in which the United States had to compete against all other actors in order to secure its own survival and prosperity, regardless if they were liberal democracies or authoritarian regimes. As Trump declared before the United Nations General

Assembly: “As President of the United States, I will always put America first, just like you, as the leaders of your countries, will always, and should always, put your countries first.”⁴¹

Trump expressed a *realpolitik* perspective of world politics that closely aligned with the international relations (IR) theory of (neo-)realism in that military and economic power alone determined a state’s national security and survival in the international system (Mearsheimer 2001).⁴² National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and Trump’s chief economic advisor Gary Cohn would accordingly frame America First in deliberate opposition to a liberal-institutionalist view of international relations as a ‘global community’ in an op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal*, instead depicting the international system as an ‘arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage’.⁴³ The ideational dimension of America First thus represented a deliberate break with the liberal Wilsonian tradition of US foreign policy and a strategic vision of cooperative engagement that sought to realize security and prosperity for the United States primarily in conjunction with US allies and partners and in support of a liberal world order at large.⁴⁴ Trump reduced hegemony to an emphasis of American economic and military supremacy, decoupling it from the notion of American exceptionalism and the country’s identity as ‘indispensable’ world leader and global defender of freedom and democracy.⁴⁵ In Trump’s rhetoric, the key geopolitical narrative of American decline and weakness and hostility toward liberal internationalism were mutually reinforcing elements in legitimizing America First. While not negating US cooperation and engagement altogether and retreating the United States into a 21st century neo-isolationism, Trump’s transactional understanding of international affairs measured American foreign policy successes in direct political gain and economic benefit to the United States, rather than in any joint commitment to universal values. Promotion of human rights and support for democracy

abroad therefore essentially ceased to be foreign policy priorities under the Trump administration.⁴⁶

Hostility towards the liberal international order and America's role as its leader and primary guarantor, as well as attacking the associated costs in both security and economic terms were the most prominent hallmark of Trump's blend of anti-globalist nationalism and populist anti-elitism.⁴⁷ Politically, this had its clearest manifestations in Trump's withdrawal from several key multilateral agreements, considered signature achievements of President Obama's cooperative approach to US foreign and security policy, including the Trans Pacific Partnership agreement (TPP); the Paris climate change accord; and the Iran nuclear agreement.⁴⁸ On trade, Trump focused on confronting China and other 'unfair' competitors of the United States, including Canada, Mexico, Germany and the European Union (EU) who had supposedly exploited the 'bad deals' negotiated by Trump's globalist oriented predecessors, relying on populist appeals to legitimate his protectionist course: "In a Trump administration, we will negotiate trade deals on behalf of American workers – not on behalf of global corporations."⁴⁹ Trump would subsequently use section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act to impose tariffs on imports of steel and aluminum from China, Canada, and the EU after a Commerce Department investigation determined them to be a threat to national security for degrading America's industrial a base.⁵⁰ Immigration in turn was similarly framed in a national security context, and identified almost exclusively as prevalent source of terrorism, violent crime and illegal drugs, as expressed in President Trump's ban on immigration from seven majority Muslim countries to the United States in January 2017.⁵¹ Trump would frequently use exaggerated statistics and misleading statements to legitimate claims about thousands of potential terrorists and criminals supposedly apprehended at the US border and narrate anecdotes about ordinary Americans as victims of violent migrant criminals, mobilizing nativist resentment in support for his border

security and anti-immigration agenda, in particular construction of the US-Mexican border wall to ‘stop the gangs and the violence, and to stop the drugs from pouring into our communities’.⁵²

Anti-globalism also informed Trump’s publicly stated views on NATO as ‘obsolete’ and repeated attacks on NATO member states, Germany in particular, for failing the NATO target of committing 2 per cent of national GDP for defense spending.⁵³ In Trump’s assessment other countries ‘owed’ the United States ‘vast sums’ of money for underspending and neglecting their NATO commitments; a view that he also repeatedly publicized via Twitter.⁵⁴ Trump’s behavior toward authoritarian leaders like North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un, Vladimir Putin, Rodrigo Duterte, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, or Xi Jinping was in contrast predominantly one of appreciation and respect, - at one point declaring on Twitter that he and Kim had fallen ‘in love’ -, despite longstanding and persistent rivalries with the United States and significant disagreement on a range of policy issues, from North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme to Chinese trade practices and Russian revisionism in Eastern Europe.⁵⁵ What these authoritarian leaders and Trump had in common, however, was their hostility towards the principles of liberal democracy at home and the rules-based international order abroad. In deemphasizing the global leadership role of the United States, America First was indirectly advancing Russian and Chinese ambitions for a multipolar world order and a return of traditional geopolitics and regional spheres of influence, despite continued US opposition to China’s land reclamation activities and increasing militarization of the South China Sea, and Putin’s annexation of Crimea in practice.⁵⁶

Some of Trump’s harshest and most persistent criticism, was accordingly reserved for the leaders of longstanding American allies, including Chancellor Angela Merkel and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, which sought to defend the existing international system against

revisionist challengers, amongst which countries like Germany and Canada increasingly counted Trump himself, if not the United States as a whole.⁵⁷ What separated Trump from previous administrations that had quarreled over the imbalance of financial and military commitments within the alliance was that Trump questioned the benefit of the very existence of NATO to the United States, seeing it predominantly as unwarranted American subsidization of the security of wealthy European countries at the expense of US taxpayers. At the same time, however, the United States continued to substantially support the NATO alliance in practice, reinforcing the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), launched under President Obama and designed as deterrence mechanism to counter potential Russian aggression in Eastern Europe by \$1.4 billion, an increase of 40% to almost \$5 billion in the fiscal year 2017.⁵⁸ US troops also made up the largest contingent for Trident Juncture in Norway, providing more than 14.000 troops, including an aircraft carrier strike group, for the largest NATO exercise since the end of the Cold War.⁵⁹ More than 8.000 US troops continued to be stationed in NATO bases in Eastern Europe on a rotational basis, and plans for a permanent US military installation, potentially named ‘Fort Trump’ were discussed between US and Polish officials.⁶⁰

Trump also authorized the sale of advanced anti-tank missiles and other lethal military equipment to Ukraine and did not veto enhanced sanctions against Russia mandated by Congress in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine and the Kremlin’s interference with American elections.⁶¹ On the issue of North-Korea’s nuclear program, Trump oscillated between high-level diplomatic overtures and threatening massive military strikes (‘fire and fury’), including with nuclear weapons, but was generally upholding traditional US opposition towards nuclear proliferation.⁶² The Trump administration also reaffirmed security guarantees for Japan and South Korea and increased military activities in the Asia-Pacific, such as the US Navy’s ‘freedom of navigation’ exercises, including dispatches of US Navy vessels through the Taiwan Strait.⁶³

As these examples illustrate, there was an obvious discrepancy between the anti-globalist preferences expressed in Trump's nationalist populist rhetoric and the practical consequences for US foreign policy and national security. On the one hand, America First faced the same practical obstacles arising from the difficulties to coordinate and implement policy changes across the vast national security bureaucracy, as well as operational realities present in America's ongoing military conflicts that had plagued the strategic aspirations of previous post-Cold War administrations.⁶⁴ On the other hand, Trump also faced resistance by the foreign policy and national security establishment itself, including the Pentagon, State Department, and from within his own White House.⁶⁵ With the departure of McMaster, Tillerson and Mattis, Trump would fill key positions for national security with conservative nationalists and technocrats more aligned with America First's emphasis of national sovereignty and transactionalism. Against a structural geopolitical reorientation of the United States, like closer strategic alignment with Russia or withdrawal from NATO, however, Trump continued to face significant and bipartisan opposition and legal obstacles by Congress, as well as hostility in American public opinion.⁶⁶

Rather than ushering in radical policy changes in practice, such as a visible reduction of US troop levels in South Korea, Germany or Japan, or even wholesale US withdrawal from NATO, Trump's nationalist populist agenda, therefore, primarily had a negative impact on the global perception of American leadership and its political reliability among its allies and partners.⁶⁷

In the words of Angela Merkel, the 'times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over.' Public opinion polls seemed to concur with this assessment, demonstrating that global publics in twenty-five countries had less confidence in Trump than

in either the authoritarian leaders of Russia and China, or liberal stalwarts like Trudeau and Merkel, while favorability ratings of the United States were much lower under Trump than under Barack Obama.⁶⁸ In Germany, only 10 per cent of respondents had confidence in Trump, while three-in-four people thought that the United States under his presidency was doing less to address global problems.⁶⁹ Support for Trump was higher, however, among supporters of European populist parties, and majority positive attitudes towards the United States prevailed in many countries.⁷⁰ Trump's repeatedly expressed hostility towards the liberal international order, including disruptive performances at high-profile G-7 and NATO summits would not radically alter US foreign policy in the short term, but it affected the medium to long-term strategic calculations regarding American grand strategy among both US allies and adversaries.⁷¹ America First together with Brexit would, for example, give renewed urgency to an intra-European debate regarding the EU's strategic autonomy in the 21st century and the necessity for greater German responsibility for European defense and security.⁷²

America's international partners began to hedge as much against the momentary volatility under Trump as against the possibility of long-term US retrenchment, calculating that while the Trump presidency was the symptom, the underlying cause was a United States, whose population and political class were no longer as willing and able to underwrite the global *Pax Americana* with its blood and treasure. Trump's nationalist populism acted as a rhetorical accelerator to a dynamic that was rooted in structural demographic and economic shifts that would make the United States *primus inter pares* in a post-American World rather than sole global superpower, a shift towards a less hegemonic role that was ultimately welcomed by a majority of the American people, who envisioned a shared global leadership role of their country, while outright nationalism still remained a minority position among the electorate.⁷³

America First and the foreign policy establishment

While America First constituted an external challenge for allies and partners of the United States, Trump also successfully mobilized foreign policy as a domestic issue, framing the liberal-internationalist foreign policy vision of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton as ‘complete and total disaster’, while attacking the wholesale failure of the collective US foreign policy establishment.⁷⁴ Until the election of Trump, this professional networked elite of national security officials, members of Congress, Washington DC think tanks, journalists, pundits, and academics had exercised a virtually unchallenged dominance over defining the common-sense status and legitimate position on US foreign policy and national security, resulting in a Washington consensus on liberal hegemony, global military primacy and US engagement that continuously reaffirmed America’s exceptional and indispensable leadership role in world politics and the existential necessity for the continued pursuit of American primacy.⁷⁵

An alternative strategic vision of restraint was regularly denounced as politically irresponsible and morally reprehensibly isolationism, including when attacking Obama’s reluctance to militarily intervene in Syria, or denouncing any cuts to the American defense budget. Dissatisfaction with the foreign policy establishment’s dogmatic position, its perceived lack of political nuance and habitual promotion of military interventionism had given rise to the derogatory label of the ‘Blob’, a moniker awarded by Ben Rhodes, Obama’s foreign policy speech writer and deputy national security advisor.⁷⁶ According to Rhodes, the ‘Blob’ included Hillary Clinton, Robert Gates and supporters of the Iraq War in both parties as well as foreign policy experts, think tanks and elite media outlets like the *Washington Post* and the *New Yorker*. While Rhodes’ criticism had targeted the foreign policy establishment’s opposition towards President Obama’s policies on Syria and Iran in particular, Trump’s attacks were

farmed in nationalist populist terms, as overdue opposition against a borderline treasonous globalist cabal that betrayed the ideal of ‘Americanism’:

They're all part of the same political establishment. They go to the same restaurants, they attend the same conferences, they have the same friends and connections. They all support the same ideology of globalism that makes them rich while shipping your jobs, your factories, and your wealth to other countries.⁷⁷

In his opposition to American leadership of the liberal international order and questioning of the internationalist premise of American exceptionalism, Trump posed an unprecedented challenge to the political dominance of the foreign policy establishment and its advocacy of liberal hegemony.⁷⁸ The significance of this perceived threat was illustrated by the wholesale denunciation of Trump’s rhetoric and policies by the ‘Blob’, which went far beyond previous attacks on Obama’s ‘leading from behind’ stance, George W. Bush’s overreach in Iraq, or the lacking strategic coherence of Bill Clinton. Both Republican and Democratic foreign policy and national security experts, leading Washington think tanks like the Council on Foreign Relations and national and international media outlets from the *Atlantic* to the *Financial Times* attacked Trump for abdicating from global leadership and retreating into an ill-conceived transactional nationalism.⁷⁹ A letter signed by over fifty GOP foreign policy experts and former national security officials, part of a wider network of conservative ‘Never Trumpers’, that was published in the *New York Times* in August 2016 declared that Trump not only lacked the ‘character, values and experience’ to be President, but that he risked the ‘country’s national security and well-being’.⁸⁰

These critics viewed Trump as genuine threat to the survival of a liberal world order and the geopolitical cohesion of the West due to his decades-long hostility towards free trade, US alliances and international cooperation.⁸¹ Trump in turn outlined ‘principled realism’ as a foreign policy strategy that would ‘not be held hostage to the dogmas, discredited ideologies, and so-called experts who have been proven wrong over the years, time and time again’ given the failures of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and their inability to prevent rival powers like China and close US allies such as Germany from taking advantage of the United States.⁸²

In criticizing the Washington establishment for its dismal track-record of ‘failed policies and continued losses in war’ and misguided promotion of an activist foreign policy agenda, America First partially reflected the concerns of a deviant group of foreign policy critics in the United States.⁸³ This heterogeneous coalition of libertarian conservatives; progressive critics of American foreign policy; and neorealist IR scholars advocated the retrenchment of US power to varying degrees and favored an overall American grand strategy of restraint.⁸⁴ Realist critics in particular seemingly concurred with Trump’s noninterventionist leanings and anti-establishment critique, as they characterized the foreign policy community in the United States as ‘dysfunctional’ and ‘disdainful of alternative perspectives’.⁸⁵ However, Trump’s overall lack of strategic coherence and consistency, poor attention to policy planning and implementation, and, at times, dysfunctional White House administration made any identification of America First as a genuine Trump Doctrine or grand strategy highly doubtful.⁸⁶

As realists themselves would point out, the combination of the President’s political and personal deficiencies, together with his protectionist and nativist impulses and continued large-scale security commitments towards wealthy allies like Japan, South Korea and the European

NATO partners, made it obvious that America First was not a realist grand strategy of offshore balancing.⁸⁷ Strategic incoherence was constantly on display with Trump, who seemingly endorsed the hawkish positions of political advisors like Bolton and Pompeo and engaged in bellicose rhetoric towards opponents like North-Korea and Iran, but would prioritize diplomatic overtures towards Kim Jong-un and call off air strikes against Iran in retaliation for the downing of a US reconnaissance drone, citing predicted Iranian casualties as reason for his restraint. Yet, the inconsistency between a nationalist populist rhetoric of fundamental change and renewal and relative policy continuity was also the result of Trump's personnel choices. Trump would repeatedly turn to seasoned establishment figures to fill key positions for national security, including Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster as his second National Security Advisor following the resignation of Lieutenant General Michael Flynn from the role, General James Mattis as Secretary of Defense, and General John Kelly, first as Secretary for Homeland Security and then as his second White House Chief of Staff. These long-serving insiders of the national security state were seen as safe pair of hands and the 'adults in the room' that would reign in Trump's nationalist-populist impulses, check the influence of the anti-globalist wing around policy advisers Steve Bannon and Steven Miller, and guarantee strategic continuity.⁸⁸

In identifying rogue regimes, international terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as some of the most significant threats facing the United States, Trump and his administration would indeed essentially remain within established parameters of mainstream US national security thinking, and not fundamentally alter the threat perceptions and strategic rationales of Trump's immediate predecessors in office.⁸⁹ In reemphasizing American global military primacy and the threat of WMD-armed rogue regimes, in particular North Korea and Iran, both members of Bush's 'axis of evil', Trump's 2017 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) partially reproduced the geostrategic focus of the Bush administration.⁹⁰ Even

the Trump administration's renewed strategic focus regarding great power competition with near-peer rivals like Russia and China in a more competitive international environment had been somewhat foreshadowed in Obama's last NSS document of 2015, and an increased US military presence in the Asia-Pacific following Obama's 'pivot to Asia' in 2011/2012.⁹¹

Where Trump's 'principled realism' primarily counteracted the liberal-institutionalist vision of Obama and Clinton, America First's anti-globalism simultaneously drew from a legitimate and long-established foreign policy tradition in its emphasis of Jacksonian unilateralism and military supremacy that promoted a considerable degree of continuity in conservative foreign policy thinking and practice.⁹² Mike Pompeo, who followed Tillerson as Secretary of State and John Bolton, who replaced McMaster as National Security Advisor were considered outspoken foreign policy hawks, especially in considering military options against Iran; their overall perspective, however, reflected a traditional neoconservative preference for unilateralism, the pre-emptive use of military power against perceived threats to US national security and interests, and the perpetuation of the unipolar primacy of the United States both economically and militarily.⁹³ Trump promoted several policies in line with traditional neoconservative preferences, such as staunch support for Israel including recognition of Jerusalem as its capital; growing defense spending, requesting \$750 billion for the fiscal year 2020 after substantial increases in 2017, 2018 and 2019 of more than \$133 billion in total; and withdrawing the United States from the UN Human Rights Council for its anti-Israel and anti-American bias.⁹⁴

America First, however, was not simply a perpetuation of neoconservative orthodoxy in foreign policy; it advanced a declinist narrative of American weakness as direct result of the foreign establishment's misguided globalism and interventionism in the public sphere that found a particular strong echo among GOP voters, where over 80 per cent of Republicans supported

Trump's foreign policy restraint and his promise of an American national revival.⁹⁵ This popular support forced many establishment conservatives to prioritize their nationalist-unilateral vision of US foreign policy over their support for an activist promotion of human rights and globally advancing the cause of liberal democracy and free trade.⁹⁶

America First had thus successfully challenged the notion that liberal hegemony was without legitimate alternative in the public sphere and political discourse. Two major Democratic presidential candidates for the 2020 presidential election, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren would in turn outline progressive foreign policy platforms both in opposition to Trump's America First nationalism and excessive defense spending, continued military interventions overseas, the Afghanistan War and US support for the Saudi war in Yemen.⁹⁷ Research by Gallup revealed that the American electorate in 2019 was almost evenly split between supporters of the neoconservative (21 per cent) and liberal-internationalist (27 per cent) variations of American primacy and liberal hegemony and supporters of variants of restraint, from nationalist populists (9 per cent) to 'diplomatic realists' (21 per cent) and 'isolationists/pacifists' (18 per cent), concluding that there was no longer a 'single, coherent, national strategic vision (if there ever was one) for how the U.S. should face the rest of the world.'⁹⁸ Trump's nationalist populist intervention against the US foreign policy establishment resulted in the most intense debate on the fundamental principles, normative assumptions, and political, economic and military costs and benefits of US foreign policy and American grand strategy since the end of the Cold War, forcing both Republicans and Democrats to explore alternatives for a new strategic consensus to be forged between elites and the American public.⁹⁹

Conclusion

To what extent has populism impacted US foreign policy under the Trump administration? As this article has argued, Donald Trump has successfully exploited a long-standing gap between public opinion and the foreign policy establishment on the overall degree of US engagement abroad. Trump's nationalist populist vision of America First, at the same time, mobilized sentiments of political alienation, economic insecurity and cultural anxiety felt by a particular segment of American voters regarding globalization, immigration and changing demographics, in order to legitimate a fundamental remake of US foreign, economic and immigration policies. The main political effects of this nationalist populist reframing of US foreign policy were to challenge global perceptions of US engagement and international leadership abroad, and to erode the ideological dominance of the US foreign policy establishment's advocacy of liberal hegemony at home. America First combined populist anti-elitism against the Washington 'swamp' and the supporters of liberal hegemony in politics, think tanks and the media with a nationalist anti-globalism that prioritized the national interest of the United States over its longstanding commitment to and leadership of a rules-based international order. This had its clearest manifestations in Trump's economic protectionism and anti-immigration policies. At the same time, there was a considerable disconnect between the populist and anti-globalist rhetoric of America First and its practical consequences for US foreign policy, for example, in the United States' continued and even enhanced support for the NATO alliance or US partners in Asia. On the one hand, Trump's nationalist populist course faced continued resistance from within his government, the courts and American public opinion. More significantly, however, President Trump's endorsement of Jacksonian unilateralism and neoconservative primacy resulted in foreign policies that were not a radical departure from established practice and a retreat into isolationism, but rather a nationalist-conservative articulation of American primacy.

America First would therefore not signal the end of the liberal international order per se, but its populist intervention against the establishment successfully disrupted the political status quo and highlighted a shift in the foreign policy debate in both mainstream parties in the United States towards recognizing that restraint could not simply be dismissed as ill-advised isolationism, but had to be considered as legitimate strategic alternative. The most significant political impact of Trump's nationalist populist rhetoric of America First was therefore ideational.¹⁰⁰ In challenging the political dominance of the foreign policy establishment, Trump opened the door for a potential recalibration of American grand strategy away from the bipartisan consensus on liberal hegemony and towards realignment between elite and popular attitudes on a US foreign policy, neither defined by nationalist populism nor post-Cold War primacy.

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