

The Illusive Search for a Trump Doctrine: Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

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Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

It is a gross understatement to say that 2016 has been a year of profound political surprises. Polls and analyst predictions on Brexit and the US Presidential election proved woefully inaccurate. The unexpected election victory of Donald Trump has had profound reverberations across the world. Some European leaders expressed shock at the prospect of a Trump Presidency.

Though Trump is well known across the world as a billionaire property mogul, reality talk show host, and the Donald is infamous for his roguish behavior and controversial comments on women, Mexicans and Muslims, analysts are perplexed on the policy direction of the President elect's future administration.

Never has a presidential candidate been so vague or simplistic in his policy pronouncements. Beyond sound bites and slogans it is difficult to forecast the incoming Administration's programmatic direction. This is especially true in the foreign policy arena. Whether this vacuity is by strategic design or attributable to the President elect's intellectual vapidity is anyone's guess. The problem is, moreover, exacerbated by paucity of his written work on defense issues.

John Haines of the Foreign Policy Research Institute of Philadelphia has analyzed his few writings on national security issues to divine a possible Trump Doctrine. Though hesitant to make any definitive judgments about Trump's national security views, Haines finds that they resemble a "peace through strength doctrine", and they emphasize avoiding wars unrelated to US strategic interests [1]. Trump puts a premium on overwhelming military superiority to deter external aggression. If America must go to war Trump believes enemies must be annihilated by all means necessary. One immediately thinks of Ronald Reagan as a precedent to predict Trump's future actions. Reagan similarly disdained using the military for projects removed from US homeland security interests.

Reagan was also a conservative maverick populist that railed against the establishment, who was considered an extremist by the Republican Party vanguard and he took far right stands that minorities and women found offensive. The precedent, however, is imperfect. Reagan was a proponent of open borders and free trade. It was his Administration that gave amnesty to illegal aliens. Trump contrastingly envisions an America that builds walls, protects industry and deports illegal immigrants. Reagan, furthermore, challenged Russia on human rights issues, favored a strong NATO and championed democracy promotion.

Trump alternatively declares Putin is a "great leader" and he intends to reset relations with Russia on a more harmonious path. The President elect's promise to pull out of NATO if European allies do not share the defense burden, has cast doubt on the future of the Trans-Atlantic alliance. The incoming Administration is likely to give Putin a

freer hand to managing Ukraine and Syria and probably will shelve the Obama's democracy promotion agenda. If alive, Reagan would have disappointed.

Given the problematic Reagan analogy, recurring to Walter Russell Meade's four foreign policy traditions as a guide for divining a Trump Doctrine could be useful. Meade argues that historically American foreign policy has oscillated between competing schools of thought that he associates with past presidents. He uses the international relations policies of Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Alexander Hamilton and Woodrow Wilson as the bedrock for his classification scheme [2].

Meade argues that these presidential administrations shaped the historical contours of US diplomacy and military action. These traditions can be described as distinct schools of thought with Jeffersonianism as isolationist, Jacksonianism as neo-isolationist, Hamiltonianism as economically internationalist and Wilsonianism as liberal internationalist. Trump rejects the Wilsonian emphasis on democracy promotion, respect for international legal norms and their fixation on advancing human rights. The President elect's policy pronouncements; however, do navigate precariously across the other three traditions. Trump often straddles between a Hamiltonian pro-business growth orientation, a Jeffersonian dislike of European entanglements and most of all he echoes Jacksonian style populism.

Meade describes Trump as a "nihilistic populist" and a "Jacksonian". He argues that Jacksonians tend not to favor international affairs for it interferes with the implementation of their populist agenda [3]. Like Jackson Trump is a populist who ranted and railed against the political and economic establishment in favor of the little guy or in the President elect's words the "forgotten man and forgotten woman". Though Jacksonians typically avoid international interventions when America is attacked they have a totalistic conception of war and will use maximum overwhelming force to crush enemies. Trump's promise to bomb the "hell out of ISIS" and his willingness to employ the nuclear option against America's adversaries falls squarely within this tradition. Meade expects that Trump will prioritize America's "shale oil/gas revolution" to maximize economic autonomy and reverse the pernicious effects of de-industrialization [4,5].

Given Trump's ideological eclecticism, how might his foreign policy evolve? Based on his statements his administration could move simultaneously in three discordant directions. These are: (1) America fist hyper nationalism and rejection of globalization; (2) a total war on Islamic extremism and jihadist terrorism; and (3) a return to realpolitik.

The President's elect's victory has been attributed to support by middle and working classes (mostly white) whose incomes have stagnated as a consequence of de-industrialization and globalization.

The movement of industries overseas and the influx of immigrants have impaired their economic and socio-cultural status. The economic struggle of the white middle and working class is exacerbated by cultural threats of demographic changes that suggest a non-Caucasian majority in the next 50 years.

Should anyone think that Trump's victory reflects America's peculiar inherent racism, they would be wrong. Trump's lambasting of the mainly white Washington and Wall Street power elite also resonated among his supporters. The rise of the populist right is furthermore a global development and can be seen in Brexit's success and anti-immigrant resentment across Europe. Silvio Berlusconi in Italy capitalized on comparable resentments and the success of European anti-immigrant politicians like Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage and Geert Wilders is testimony to the post-industrial and socio-cultural crisis affecting the Western world. It is also a sign of the intellectual bankruptcy of the contemporary political left that has failed to effectively rally the middle and working classes to its cause.

Though he springs from the most privileged sector of American society, Trump managed to convince his supporters that the country's woes were attributable to a Washington and Wall Street power elite who sold the country out to nefarious global economic and political institutions. Trump's populism fed off the fears, resentments and neurosis of the middle class promising them he would restore the American dream, rebuild industries, build a wall with Mexico, renegotiate NAFTA, expel illegals, "get tough" with China and ban Muslims from coming to the country.

Trump's America First agenda demands that he get a better deal from international actors. Based on his intentions China must end trade barriers or face increased tariffs, Mexico must finance his projected wall on our southern border, European countries must pay more for their defense or face a US withdraw from NATO, and Japan must acquire nuclear weapons to alleviate America's defense burden in Asia. If he seriously intends to implement this agenda it implies potential trade wars and a possible US disengagement from Europe and Asia. Both would prove to be destabilizing.

The President elect's intent to confront Islamic extremism and jihadist terrorism reflects a Jacksonian desire to annihilate enemies. Similarly his willingness to abrogate the Iranian nuclear deal and renegotiate its terms suggests a totalistic desire to confront Tehran's Islamic revolutionary regime. Yet his critique of the Iraq and Libyan wars suggest a contrary impulse to avoid significant overseas interventions. It will be up to his Administration to reconcile these inconsistencies. Trump's selection of Michael Flynn as his national security and James Mattis as Defense Secretary suggests a hawkish stance against jihadist terrorism. Flynn and Mattis are ex-generals that

have been on the front lines in America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and both have been critical of the Obama's administrations weakness in confronting Islamic extremism.

Trump's willingness to reset Washington's relationship with Moscow and his admiration for Vladimir Putin generated considerable controversy during the campaign. The President elect's desire to normalize relations with Russia has been discussed as return to power politics in US statecraft. Trump's is not apprehensive about Putin's repression at home or Moscow's dismemberment of the Ukraine. He sees these actions as this well within Russia's sphere of influence and not part of America's concern. Moscow's Syrian intervention is similarly viewed as a valuable contribution to America's war against Islamic State and Al Qaeda. Here Trump may be channeling Kissinger and Nixon's use of diplomacy to secure vital US interests.

Donald Trump's election victory has generated hysteria and apprehension. This is understandable. Given his narcissistic personality, his incessant and undisciplined Tweets, his temper tantrums and swaggering braggadocio we cannot discount a foreign policy that gyrates upon President elect's mercurial impulses. This being said such a prospect is unlikely. Presidential candidates soon adjust to the realities of power politics in Washington and the world stage. Whatever its failings Trump's desire to renegotiate the terms of the Iran nuclear accord is wildly unrealistic. If serious any abrogation of the agreement would engender severe opposition from European allies, the UN and it compromises his desire to reset relations with Russia. Irrespective of his desire to profoundly alter US foreign policy, entrenched interests, global financial restraints and bureaucratic incrementalism militate against huge policy discontinuities. Despite Barak Obama rejection George W. Bush's national security doctrine his diplomatic and military actions are not dramatically different from his predecessor's conduct. One suspects (hopes) that this will be the case with the incoming Trump Administration.

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