

Closed Session

Is there a Trump Doctrine in
American Foreign Policy?



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The TRT World Forum 2018, recognised as one of the most significant political events of the year, took place from October 3rd-4th at the Swissotel in Istanbul gathering together over 600 esteemed guests and panellists. Consisting of 8 public sessions, 11 closed sessions and keynote speeches delivered by some of our most esteemed guests, this year's Forum succeeded in providing a platform for serious engagement with the most pressing challenges of our time. The themes of the sessions ranged from the future of the Middle East and the European Union to the growing trend of Islamophobia, refugees, Turkish foreign policy in an age of crisis, the crisis of new media and female leadership in a world of conflict. Uniting all of these themes was a focus on the fragmented state of today's world and a sincere desire to offer meaningful solutions.

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Summary



On October 3, 2018, TRT World Research Centre held a roundtable meeting on U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration.

Even before President Trump took office, the question of how the new administration would approach U.S. foreign policy had become an issue of discussion. As Trump approaches two years in office, scholars, journalists and pundits have offered diverging perspectives regarding Trump's foreign policy. It is widely held that Trump does not have a coherent grand strategy geared towards the execution of purposive actions and that his foreign policy is strategically incoherent, even anti-strategic. The counterpoint is that Trump does have coherent foreign policy

doctrine, but that it is ill-conceived and ill-prepared to serve the strategic interests of the United States. Trump's rhetoric against free trade, multilateral institutions and alliance politics, and his reluctance to assume global leadership have cast doubt on the fate of the existing world order. On the basis of these developments in American foreign policy, scholars concerned with the survival of the liberal order have drawn attention to the illiberal characteristics of President Trump's foreign policy preferences, their implications and potential consequences, and have called for an urgent defence of liberalism. Against this backdrop, this session will delve into the fundamentals of the U.S. foreign policy and discuss Trump's foreign policy vision and its implications for the world.

Discussion themes of the session:

- The liberal world order: is it a myth or reality? Is it in retreat?
- Does the uncertain character of Trump's Foreign policy represent a danger to the established world order?
- Rhetoric vs. praxis: Does Trump's rhetoric reflect his actual foreign policy practices?
- Will Trump's intervention in the Korean conflict prove to be an example for other long-running conflicts?

Introduction

What is the liberal democratic order? "I suppose where you stand is where you sit," the speaker contended. If one is an American or European or a citizen of a prosperous country that benefits from this liberal democratic order, one thinks this is a good thing. It expands the horizons of democratic market economic freedom, which was the main rhetoric underlying the Bush doctrine. Moreover, according to the speaker, for those who are beneficiaries of the system, the liberal democratic order represents a rules-based system designed to organise relations of countries based on democratic principles and market economics. In theory, the idea is to maximise freedom - political and economic - and establish institutions that can advance freedom and can regulate disputes between countries according to an agreed upon set of rules- whether they are outlined by the UN charter, UN Declaration of Human Rights, implemented through the Bretton Woods Institutions, or (one would like to believe) the European Union.

However, the speaker highlighted, if you are not part of the prosperous group of nations or those who have not established democracies, particularly in the Middle East, the liberal democratic order is mostly empty rhetoric. From this perspective, it can be interpreted as a set of excuses to justify great power politics, exploitation and domination. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq was held up as an exemplar in this regard. The first speaker personally believed that "it was the biggest blunder of U.S. foreign policy at least in my lifetime." One of the biggest mistakes that the U.S. made was that they did not listen to Turkey. At that time, the Turkish General Staff sent the Bush administration a list of 250 questions regarding what would happen after the military victory - because everybody knew military victory was going to happen quickly. "What will you do to rebuild Iraq?" was one of them; the Americans had no answer. Answers that came back were vague. "We will help the Iraqi government to organise a provisional government which will lead to democratic elections and the Iraqi people will choose their future" was the basic refrain for every question. The Americans, according to one of the speakers, wished for such a straightforward path to a democratic order.

President Trump seems to believe in a transactional way of conducting foreign policy, the speaker continued. Being in the real-estate business, everything is about transaction. They get the land; they get their contractors; they agree a price. It's a transaction. They are not managing an

organisation. Therefore, a rules-based order, that ties the U.S. to other countries with mutual obligations and opportunities, is contrary to that way Trump sees the world. A property developer, the speaker emphasised, wants to be free to cut the deals they need. Real-estate development in New York is a tough business, where cutting corners to maximise margins is a given, so the rules-based system based on multi-literalism or globalism is not something that fits with that.

Bringing it back to the Middle East region, a journalist in attendance stated that we see Trump's transactional nature so vividly in the Iran-Saudi relationship. They held that he chose to go to Riyadh as his first overseas trip because Kushner was urged to do that by Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman. His response was along the lines of: "I do not really want to go but if they will sign big deals, then I will go." The journalist argued that there is a huge level of cynicism in his doctrine, like the fact that in America he can talk about how "Islam hates us," and yet President Trump can still go to Riyadh and make deals.

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The Trump Doctrine

Another speaker believed that we should let President Trump speak for himself. During the U.N. general assembly (25/09/2018), he said "We reject the ideology of globalism and accept the ideology of patriotism. We are only going to give to those who respect us, who frankly are our friends." This is why, according to the speaker, America will always choose independence and cooperation over global governance control and domination. The U.S. will not tell you how to live, work or worship. They only ask that other nations respect their sovereignty. For the U.S., the speaker stressed, President Trump believes this is advantageous because he can always argue over how strong the U.S. is, irrespective of how much influence it has lost. It is still the strongest country in earth, and because of that, it will continue to find success in transactional diplomacy and bilateral agreements. Hence, the Trump doctrine, the speaker continued, is really this vogue concept that United States does better on its own because of its strength and its drive to be unencumbered on the world stage. It represents a worldview that harkens back to what the first U.S. president George Washington said in his famous farewell address: "we avoid international encumbrance, peace at home, peace in the world." This is a strain in American foreign policy that has been there since the beginning.

The second speaker invoked Thomas Friedman, who said Trump's doctrine is "Obama built it, I broke it, you fix it". When one looks at major divisions in health, energy, and economy, President Trump has not spend one tenth of time his predecessors spent in trying to build consensus. Normally U.S. presidents, the speaker stressed, would convene meetings, would have councils - councils on economic affairs, councils on health issues - and they would meet with experts and listen to their ideas. Only then would they would make up their minds. Trump has come to office with a New York real-estate mind set, believing that he already knows everything he needs to. Crucially, according to the speaker, enough of the American electorate also believe that Trump knows everything he needs to know. He has been given the political capital to call a long-standing deal, such as NAFTA, the "worst deal ever." This is unprecedented in U.S. political history. The Trump presidency truly marks a new era in American politics, something that we should be aware of.

Another speaker contemplated how Trump has upended the status quo on NATO. According to the speaker:

He has really undermined the legitimacy of NATO as an organisation, as he suggested shortly after he was elected that NATO is obsolete. Now he says it is not

obsolete anymore but I am not sure what that's worth. When all the NATO allies in his first visit to brand new NATO headquarters were begging him to invoke article 5, which is that all NATO members go to war when a member is attacked. They were begging him to say OK, I believe in that too. They put him in front of a sculpture of Article 5 of the NATO treaty to give a speech and he never once mentioned Article 5 which has been invoked once in history to help the U.S. after September 11. Instead, he chose to criticise his allies for not spending enough money on defence. He feels the same way about the EU- the EU is everything he hates. It's multilateral, it's based on liberal values both socially and politically. His doctrine is rhetorical and uses catchy phrases like: "we don't like globalism, we like patriotism." It doesn't have any real strategic vision to it in terms of next steps. It is fundamentally a rejection of the entire conception of how we believe the world should be best ordered to maximise the well-being of ourselves through the well-being of our allies.

The second speaker also believed that we have to see these changes as not only an issue of the U.S. or just President Trump, but rather in the context of a new trend emerging in global politics, namely the rise of populism. When one looks at leaders like Trump, Putin, Modi, Netanyahu, Merkel, Xi Jinping, they are very popular at home, but not so popular as abroad. The era of personalities, such as Clinton, Blair, Mandela, who were very popular both at home and around the globe, is over according to the speaker. The politics of today seem to require a type of domestic popularity that does not translate into international popularity. As part of this trend, we see an increased use of foreign policy issues as domestic consolidators. With regards to President Trump, according to the speaker, it is insignificant whether he is popular internationally or not. President Trump maintains a relatively high level of support at home, and while it may not be welcome news for the Democrats, it remains a distinct possibility that he will be a two-term president.

The real surprise, the speaker speculated, will come in his second term, and that is going to be a really interesting period for the world. They argued that President Trump will reveal his cards with Iran in his second term, and Iran will try to deal with him then. While his rhetoric of economic protectionism may be politically beneficial, ultimately the actions he has taken, particularly with regards to trade, will create long-term challenges for the United States. The price of his policies will be paid for, perhaps not by him, but for the next Republican candidate after him.

Trade Wars

Another speaker contended the most significant issue right now are the trade wars and hardening bilateral relations with China. Trump supporters have been complaining about unfair trade practices and the inaction of Washington on trade imbalance with China. Intellectuals and entrepreneurs have also been voicing their concerns regarding intellectual property rights infringement by China. Additionally, 16 American intelligence agencies have written a report about the cyber-espionage activities of China in the U.S., further increasing the pressure. Therefore, Trump is not

acting wholly outside of the mandate given to him by his supporters and is, according to the speaker, seeking to strike a balance between his voter base and the Washington DC establishment. According to the speaker, the solution to these issues lies with the business community. Since the imposition of over \$200 billion USD in tariffs, Walmart, Apple, and others have been arguing that measures imposed by the Trump administration have gone too far. However, according to the speaker's perspective, there will be no action to counter this approach until after the mid-term elections at the earliest.

Strategic Thinking vs Tactical Manoeuvring

One speaker asserted that it is the case that U.S. presidents are not necessarily aware or concerned of the strategic consistency and logic of their positions. Not unlike presidents Truman, Nixon or even Obama, it is possible to see Trump's policies as being shaped by the contingencies of the time. In this context the speaker asserted that he is certain that when President Trump was campaigning for office, he did not have any idea that he would end up with meeting with president of North Korea. Once in office, presidents are faced with certain realities that require pragmatic engagement. Subsequently, Trump, according to the speaker, is trying to find practical solutions to some the immediate issues facing him. According to the speaker:

Some claim Trump's policies are not any different than Obama when you look at their insights. It is a different tone of play. But excuse my language, the new Trump language is "we are America, b!tch." This is the attitude that Trump portrays. Whether we like it or not, that makes him popular at home. While we might think this is humorous, it is helping him at home. At the end of today, his measure of success is going to be [whether] he can earn a second win and the polls show that he might. Thus, he is trying to give this attitude that he is an authoritarian and American people like him because he is telling him what they want to hear. His doctrine is to "Make America Great Again"; Buy American; Employ American; these attitudes make people proud again.

Moreover, there is a resemblance between a very popular classic American story - Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* - and current events, according to the speaker:

Those who have read it know there is a big guy with big hand and he has this pet which is a mouse, he loves it but unintentionally kills it. Trump maybe means well but sometimes he actually makes mistakes that are going to be much more expensive for the U.S. foreign policy in the long run. He said he told the king of Saudi Arabia we are protecting you and you have to pay for it. We all know Saudis have been with the U.S. since Kissinger's time, but if you say this in public, the humiliation you put the Saudi King in front of his people is considerable. Sending a tweet about imposing new tariffs on Turkish iron and steel might sound good in the short term - it might punish some Turkish companies - but in the long-run its going to make construction much more expensive in the U.S., because no other country can provide those prices in the neighbourhood. This attitude of trying to conduct foreign policy with the moment's sprit might give him popularity at home, but in the long run it is going to have its effects on U.S. interests which we will all observe.

Evangelical Influence

Another speaker discussed the relevance of Evangelism with respect to President Trump and its influence on his foreign policy directionality. When looking at the history of American Evangelism, particularly the third-wave evangelism that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, one can see its impact on U.S. foreign policy. The State Department, Pentagon and National Security Council often invoked evangelical concerns in cases where they aligned with specific U.S. foreign policy objectives. The speaker underlined that what we have been seeing the last couple of years is an increasing influence of evangelism in cases such as the moving of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem and the case

of Andrew Bunson, the U.S. pastor who was jailed in Turkey on terrorism charges. The point here being that elements of the Trump administration are, according to the speaker, more closely tied to evangelical groups than previous administrations, thereby giving evangelical concerns more consideration in their rhetoric, if not in practice. The speaker observed how we do not see major swings in the evangelical voters beginning from 1960 onwards. They are Republican and they vote for Republican candidates. When they have someone closer to them, they have better access to the administration and that access has demonstrated influence on U.S. foreign policy.

America: More of the Same

In a similar vein as the speaker who used Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* as an analogy for the Trump presidency, another speaker emphasised a novel by Ernest Hemingway in which a man who goes bankrupt. When asked how, he says it happened gradually, then suddenly. Hence, the speaker continued, when discussing U.S. foreign policy, instead of considering the Trump administration as a serious rupture of U.S. foreign policy, we should perhaps begin with a sober assessment of what has been the historical norms of U.S. foreign policy. In this light, according to the speaker, we will come to the conclusion that, in fact, the last two decades (since the George W. Bush administration) represents the deviation from previous norms of U.S. foreign policy.

According to the speaker, since the year 2000, successful presidential candidates have vowed to pursue a narrower definition of American interest around the world, something that was apparent in the Gore-Bush debate on foreign policy, the McCain-Obama debate in 2008 and the Clinton-Trump debate in 2016. The speaker underscored a trend that the American public has experienced fatigued with America's international engagements and wants some kind of closure at certain point. During the Obamas administration, the speaker remembered that they were trying to delineate this notion, saying that "we actually do not want to get involved that much but we do not want to abandon". Therefore, one can call it retrenchment instead of retreat. It could also be looked at in terms of recline instead of decline, or leading from behind instead of not leading at all. In connection to the previous point regarding Ernest Hemingway, the speaker

discussed how the Trump presidency can be seen in terms of a 'sudden' transformation built upon gradual shifts from the previous decade and a half.

Another speaker expressed his belief that this narrower understanding of American interest has in fact always been present in the U.S. public sphere. Warren Harding first evoked the concept of 'the return to normalcy' following the end of the First World War as a means of criticising President Wilson's internationalist outlook and his engagement with the League of Nations. So, this so-called 'America-first' approach was actually present in 1920s. This was considered

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as normal. It is not actually isolationism, continued the speaker, but basically taking care of your own business, or as President Obama stated “putting your home in order”.

The second factor that has been taken as novel in U.S. foreign policy when in reality is not, according to the speaker, is unilateralism and scepticism towards multilateralism. It has always, to lesser or greater degrees, been part of U.S. foreign policy. For instance, the 2003 Iraq war ‘coalition of the willing’ cobbled together by the Bush administration was done outside of any multilateral framework such as the UN or NATO. Rather, it was an ad-hoc coalition meant to achieve a very narrow objective. When President Obama called some of America’s allies “free-riders”, this was a critical turning point. For the first time since the beginning of the Cold War, a sitting president called an ally a free-rider, a discourse that had been present amongst the U.S. congress and the wider

American public for some time. With President Trump, what we have started to see is the normalisation of rhetoric that devalues America’s traditional alliances. It was gradual and now it has become sudden.

When the speaker looks at Trump’s policies, he sees them in a transactional light, namely that Trump considers alliances not as a part of long-term strategic vision, but rather as a means of achieving very particular and episodic objectives. President Trump also seems to punish U.S. allies, producing results by fear, according to the speaker. For example, he has used threats in order to get the NATO alliance members to increase their military spending to the agreed threshold of 2% of GDP.

America: Less of the Same

Thus, what is different about the Trump administration? The third speaker mentioned three factors that have so far been noticeably different. The first one is the mercantilist approach. Advocates of free trade quite naturally argue its importance. It creates complex interdependence, social interaction and, in theory, prevents trade wars between states. What one has started to see, especially with the increasing use of trade war concept in U.S. foreign policy and the presence of people like Peter Navarro in the U.S. administration, who has authored books on trade wars, is that the U.S. is now taking a mercantilist, as opposed to a liberal approach on trade for the first time since the founding of the republic.

The second factor, the speaker continued, is that we have a president who believes that he can renegotiate everything in a better way. The implication is that whatever happened prior to Trump is the worst deal ever. He called the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a now defunct proposed trade agreement, the worst deal ever. According to him, the long-standing North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is also the worst deal ever. The Climate Agreement is also the worst deal ever. Thus, the speaker claimed, instead he is saying he can re-negotiate this and that agreement, and he can do it so well that nobody could possibly be more successful than him. On this front, he is able to claim results. Under the leadership of the Trump administration, NAFTA was negotiated in a way that, for Trump, is more receptive to American interests. He also believes that he can arrive at a

The Trump approach has deprived the U.S. foreign policy of its value-based content, which the U.S. cultivated and promoted for decades

constructive result with regards to the Iran Nuclear Deal as well. He is winning even in the media- even in the Mueller investigation, the speaker highlighted. First, Mueller said he wanted to question him, and Trump refused point blank. Now, we have arrived at a point where Mueller will give him 30 questions in writing and Trump will basically answer some of those in written form, giving him nearly exactly what he wants.

The third element the speaker mentioned is how the role of U.S. military is changing. Starting from 1992, the defence budget was in constant decline with the exception of the period between 2001 and 2003. However, for the first-time since, the defence budget is increasing. Moreover, the speaker believed the idea of military deterrence and the idea of using power is becoming the norm. President Trump can basically threaten to bomb North Korea - he is very comfortable in saying this. He is not shy to threaten the use of military power at the expense of diplomacy, which has led to the resignation of a number of senior state-department officials.

With that being said, another speaker mentioned how, despite the rhetoric, the status quo has not actually been changed drastically. The speaker pointed out of the newly inked US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) that replaced NAFTA is mostly the same as its predecessor, with the exception of beefed-up rules regarding rules of origin. Regarding NATO, despite Trump's heavy and very public criticism of the alliance, the summit communique still reflected the agenda set out at the beginning of the summit. Finally, regarding the so-called trade wars the U.S. is now engaged in, the speaker contended that they are ultimately not supremely consequential because the financial structures that allow for the flow of capital around the globe have remained untouched.

Moving Forward

A journalist in attendance raised the issue of media fragmentation in the U.S. For them, what has truly changed is that there are now numerous media outlets, websites and social media that make non-mainstream feelings known. Moreover, a speaker said when you look at New York Times, LA Times, Washington Post, CNN, and so on, there is a great deal of media flak directed at Trump that he has used to his advantage and claim victimisation in order to boost his popularity. The speaker said that Turkey went through something similar in the past two decades. There was so much anti-Erdogan propaganda in the media, and it backfired, because people do not always vote in accordance with what they see in media.

Furthermore, what struck one of the speakers as a major flaw in the American system was the lack of clearly defined opposition. Unlike most other democracies, there is no single personality who represents the opposition in the American system.

Concluding remarks

Donald Trump was elected president in part because he was able to tap into the sentiments of voters who felt that they had been ignored for a long time. Subsequently, as many participants argued, the Trump presidency has brought more uncertainty to the international order. Many across the globe have been watching carefully to assess whether the "America First" doctrine of increased protectionism, unilateral sanctions and increasing disengagement from international cooperation will remain a lasting feature of the U.S. government's foreign policy.

In many ways, Trump's actions have reinforced these fears. For instance, the U.S. President has unilaterally imposed tariffs on key allies, demanded that NATO allies contribute more to defence and recently refused to sign a joint communique after June's G7 summit. Two key elements underscore why Trump's approach has been very disruptive for the world order. Firstly, he used the transactional mentality, which is rooted in his real-estate business background, to the extreme, even when dealing with traditional allies of the U.S. This has put in question existing U.S. international security commitments, combined with an unequivocal willingness to use trade policy as an instrument of economic punishment. Secondly, the Trump approach has deprived the U.S. foreign policy of its value-based content that the U.S. promoted and spread for decades.

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