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The Trump Shock: Populism and Changing Narratives of US Foreign Policy

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Abstract: This chapter examines the political rhetoric and security narratives employed by President Donald Trump in the context of US foreign policy. We will first outline the framing of America First and how this narrative disruption of the established norms of US foreign policy rhetoric represented a fusion of nationalist anti-globalism and populist anti-elitism, which targeted a bipartisan elite consensus on liberal hegemony and America's global leadership role. The chapter will outline the domestic impact of this narrative shock to the discursive hegemony of the US foreign policy establishment and how it recalibrated the debates over American grand strategy in both parties, as well as how America First both exploited and contributed to an increasing dynamic of partisan polarization in the United States. The chapter will then outline the impact of the Trump presidency in the areas of trade and economic policy and national security to assess in detail the extent to which the narrative disruption of America First resulted in structural changes in US foreign policy.

Introduction

During his inaugural address on 20 January 2021, Joe Biden called on Americans to end their 'un-civil war' and refrain from treating political opponents as mortal enemies (White House 2021). Biden vowed to defend democracy and the US Constitution and stressed the vital importance of facts and truth for the functioning of a liberal, open and democratic society. Without naming his predecessor, Biden's speech repudiated the nationalist populism of Donald Trump, who employed a divisive rhetoric of fear, anxiety, and resentment for political gain. Trump's strategy of narrative disruption and antagonistic mobilization culminated in a riot which saw a violent mob of Trump supporters attempt to overturn the result of the 2020 presidential election (Homolar and Löfflmann 2021). Some of the first executive orders Biden signed in office saw the United States re-join the Paris climate agreement and the World Health Organization (WHO), symbolically ending the era of America First in US foreign policy. But the forces of nationalist populism and nativism did

not disappear with Donald Trump's exit from the White House, and his political influence survived his banning from the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook. The United States of America remained a deeply polarized nation, while Trump's renewed bid for the presidency in 2024 remained a realistic, even probable proposition (Dimock 2021). In any case, the 74 million Americans that voted for Trump in 2020 all but guaranteed that nationalist populism would continue to dominate the Republican Party and the American right at large. This enduring quality of populism in American politics challenges the structural integrity of liberal democracy and its core institutions, casting serious doubts over the future role of the United States in the international system.

In assessing the impact of the Trump presidency and America First on US foreign policy, this chapter contributes to a growing literature on populism in International Relations (IR) and security studies that explores populism's role in informing the foreign policy decision-making process of populist leaders and parties (Lacatus and Meibauer 2020, Wehner and Thies 2020, Jenne 2021) and how populist rhetoric, beliefs and performances interact with security discourses and practices (Kurylo 2020). As such, we focus our analysis predominantly on populist discourse and foreign policy practice (PFP-4) as outlined by Wajner and Giurlando, while also considering populist foreign policy outputs and the context of American grand strategy.

Nationalist populist narratives like America First construct security imaginaries of socio-economic threat, political alienation and socio-cultural anxiety decidedly as non-elitist articulation of the ordinary fears and concerns of the 'real people' (Beeman 2018). In portraying the wholesale failure of establishment policies and ideologies and linking the existence of a corrupt elite to national decline and the socio-economic and socio-cultural

anxieties and insecurities of populist voters - for example in Trump's inaugural address on 'American carnage' (Trump 2017) - populist rhetoric centres on social constructions of enmity, existential threat and crisis (Biegon 2019, Löfflmann 2021, Skonieczny 2021, Wojczewski 2020). The securitization of policy issues, such as trade and immigration (Fermor and Holland 2021), and the identification of internal and external 'enemies of the people' simultaneously seeks to mobilize voters via affective appeals and an emphasis on dramatization, personalization and conflict, while legitimizing policy initiatives through an antagonistic framing of international politics (Skonieczny 2018, Steele and Homolar 2019, Wodak 2015).

Although the Trump era coincided with renewed public and scholarly interest in the prospect of American decline, the US continues to enjoy considerable room for manoeuvre in international affairs – diplomatically, economically, and especially militarily. The United States' relatively advantageous position in the global power structure suggests that, when thinking about the conditions that enable and constrain a Populist Foreign Policy (PFP), the US case points predominantly in the direction of domestic variables and ideational factors, rather than external, strategic constraints. This includes the nature of the US electoral and two-party political system, but also the cultural and ideological terrain on which foreign policy and national security narratives are constructed. Donald Trump has elicited many comparisons to other right-wing populists and flamboyant 'strongmen', such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom (Löfflmann 2022) with whom he shares many characteristics and rhetorical flourishes, in particular, an antagonistic framing of policy issues, such as immigration and free trade, and general hostility toward liberal internationalism, decried by Trump as un-American 'globalism'. Trumpism, at the same time, remains a *sui generis* American phenomenon, whose popularity

and political rise are intrinsically linked to Trump's status as a prominent TV celebrity and media figure in the United States prior to his run for the presidency in 2015-2016, and which further accelerated a long-standing dynamic of partisan polarization in the United States.

In contrast to the other countries and cases discussed in this volume, the United States then ultimately faces fewer external constraints due to its hegemonic status within the international system, and within the liberal international order in particular. As noted in the introduction to this volume (Giurlando and Wajner), part of the peculiarity of the Trump case rests with the fact that the populist backlash he harnessed (against the international institutions of the global order) was not primarily directed against an external 'enemy of the people' (Löfflmann 2021), but an internal challenge that targeted the very Washington foreign policy establishment that embodied America's liberal hegemony, its institutions and practices. In examining the political rhetoric and security narratives employed by Donald Trump in the context of US foreign policy, this chapter will therefore first examine the framing of America First as narrative fusion of nationalist anti-globalism and populist anti-elitism. We show how Trump's discursive intervention presented an internal narrative shock to the US foreign establishment and the bi-partisan strategic consensus on liberal hegemony. The chapter will then outline the policy impact of the Trump presidency in the areas of trade and economic policy and national security respectively to assess the extent of the narrative disruption of America First and the degree of structural change it engendered in US foreign policy.

America First as Narrative Disruption to USFP

At his inauguration in January 2017, Donald Trump declared that his election had to be seen as more than a regular transition of power, and something more akin to a political revolution,

heralding a new nationalist populist era for America's role in the world, as well as its domestic politics: '(...) today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington, DC, and giving it back to you, the people' (Trump, 2017). Against a prevailing Washington bipartisan elite consensus on liberal hegemony, economic globalization, and institutionalized multilateralism, Trump envisioned a new ideational paradigm of America First that would supposedly prioritize the interests of ordinary Americans at the expense of a globalist elite that had weakened and endangered the United States through a mix of lax immigration policies, insufficient border security, failed military interventions and unquestioning support of free trade and globalization:

From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this this day forward, it's going to be only America first. America first. Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families (Trump, 2017).

The narrative framing of America First cast the realm of international politics and foreign relations almost exclusively as one of existential threats, escalating danger and ruthless economic competition, a zero-sum game in which the United States had to compete mercilessly for advantage against the rest of the world, regardless if these competitors were liberal democracies and long-standing allies, or authoritarian regimes and traditional adversaries (Löfflmann 2019). Trump and his closest advisors such as National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster expressed a profoundly *realpolitik*-inspired vision of world politics in that military and economic power alone determined a state's national security, prosperity and survival in the international system (McMaster and Cohn 2017). Hostility towards the liberal international order and resistance to America's role as its primary guarantor was at the heart of the fusion of nationalist anti-globalism and populist anti-elitism America First embodied. (Daalder and Lindsay 2019).

The ideational dimension of America First represented a deliberate break with the liberal Wilsonian tradition of US foreign policy (Mead 2002) 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 (Hamid 2018). 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 of freedom and democracy, or support for human rights. Politically, this nationalist populist reorientation had its clearest manifestations in Trump's withdrawal from several multilateral agreements, considered signature achievements of President Obama's cooperative approach to US foreign and security policy, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) free-trade agreement; the Paris Agreement on climate change; and the Iran nuclear deal. Anti-globalism also informed Trump's publicly stated views on NATO as 'obsolete' and repeated attacks on key NATO member states, Germany in particular, for failing to fulfil the NATO target of committing 2 percent of national GDP for defense expenditures. 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 (*Deutsche Welle* 2018). What separated Trump from previous US administrations that quarrelled over the imbalance of financial and military commitments within the transatlantic alliance was that Trump questioned the benefit of the very existence of NATO to the United States, seeing it predominantly as unwarranted subsidization of the security of wealthy European nations at the expense of US taxpayers. Antagonistic narratives of enmity, geo-economic competition and Manichean confrontation were regularly employed in Trump's rhetorical repertoire to vilify long-standing allies and partners, such as 'bad' Germany, or an EU branded as 'foe' (Schütz 2019). Trump also repeatedly showed appreciation and respect for authoritarian and

nationalist populist leaders such as North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un and Russian President Vladimir Putin, as well as for President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Chinese President Xi Jinping, despite often fraught relationships of their respective countries with the United States and, in the cases of China and Russia enduring strategic rivalries and geopolitical contestations, for example over Ukraine and Taiwan. Frequent accusations of countries deliberately ‘ripping off’ the United States were thereby used both publicly and privately to compel these ‘delinquents’ to comply with Trump’s demands. During the 2020 presidential election campaign, Trump would describe increased defense expenditures by several European countries as a direct result of this hectoring diplomatic style:

And I'm making other countries pay because, you know, NATO, they weren't paying their bills. They were delinquent to use the New York real estate term. (...). They're paying \$130 billion a year more now because I said, look, you've got to pay (...). They rip us on trade and then we're supposed to protect them, the European Union (Trump 2020).

Against a structural geopolitical reorientation of the United States, like closer strategic alignment with Russia or withdrawal from NATO, however, Trump faced significant resistance by the US foreign policy and national security establishment, including the Pentagon, State Department, and from within his own White House, as well as significant bipartisan opposition and legal obstacles put in place by Congress (Anonymous 2018, Kheel 2021). These internal constraints were a significant institutional and domestic political impediment that together with Trump’s mercurial personality, poor attention to policy planning and implementation, and at times, dysfunctional White House administration, prevented the emergence of America First as a fully fleshed Trump Doctrine.

Rather than ushering in structural populist-informed changes in US foreign policy, such as a visible reduction of US troop levels in South Korea, Germany or Japan, or even wholesale

US withdrawal from NATO, Trump's America First agenda, therefore, primarily had a negative impact on the global perception of American leadership and its political reliability among its allies and partners. In the words of German chancellor Angela Merkel, the 'times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over' (*BBC News* 2017). Public opinion polls seemed to concur, demonstrating that 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 drastically lower under Trump than they had been under Barack Obama (Bialik 2018). In Germany, for example, 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 (Wike et al. 2018). Support for Trump was higher, however, among supporters of European populist parties, and majority positive attitudes towards the United States prevailed in many countries (Ibid.). Trump's 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. 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 causes were the deep-seated political polarization and government dysfunction in the United States, which were undermining the premise of *Pax Americana*, while both the American people and its political class were turning increasingly inward (Dobbins, Tarini, and Wyne 2020). International assessments of America's gradual withdrawal from world leadership had already begun under the Obama administration, sparked by President Obama's emphasis on military restraint and 'nation-building at home' (Löffmann 2017). These concerns had

intensified considerably in the America First era, with French President Emmanuel Macron, for example, declaring that the NATO alliance had become ‘brain dead’ (*Economist* 2019).

Trump’s nationalist populism acted as a rhetorical accelerator to a dynamic that was rooted in structural geopolitical, demographic and economic shifts that would constitute the United States as *primus inter pares* in a post-American World rather than a unipolar superpower. Such a shift towards a less hegemonic role of the USA in the international system, however, was welcomed by a majority of Americans, who envisioned a less militarized global leadership role for their country that should instead emphasize the foreign policy tools of diplomatic engagement and multilateralism (Bremmer 2019). Data from the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR) show that from 1974 to 2018 between 66% and 70% of Americans supported an active role of the United States in global affairs (Smeltz et al. 2018); a relatively stable figure for over four decades that nonetheless reveals a significant gap when compared to foreign policy elites, who nearly unanimously endorsed internationalism and active US engagement. This discrepancy between the Washington elite consensus on liberal hegemony and public opinion was reconfirmed in 2013, when a much-reported poll showed that 52% of Americans agreed with the statement that the ‘United States should mind its own business internationally’ (Pew 2013). This was the highest percentage of popular support for what US mainstream media and US foreign policy experts would immediately decry as dangerous and irresponsible ‘isolationism’ since 1964 (Fisher 2013). Although support for ‘isolationism’ declined to 43% in 2016, 70% of Americans polled still demanded a greater focus on domestic issues over foreign policy and 57% agreed the US should ‘deal with its own problems and let other countries deal with their problems the best they can’ (Pew 2016a). While foreign policy is traditionally less relevant as a campaign issue and tends to be less scrutinized by public opinion, these results suggest considerable public support for a

more restrained, less interventionist foreign policy of the kind that Donald Trump outlined during his presidential campaign in 2015-2016, for example when he announced during his acceptance speech of the Republican Party's nomination that: 'We must abandon the failed policy of nation building and regime change that Hillary Clinton pushed in Iraq, Libya, Egypt and Syria' (Trump 2016). The 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath, together with the failure of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, seriously diminished the credibility of the bipartisan foreign policy establishment among the general public. In the words of Andrew Bacevich: 'In the eyes of ordinary citizens, policies conceived under the direction of George H. W. Bush or George W. Bush, Bill Clinton or Hillary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice or Susan Rice no longer command automatic assent' (Bacevich 2018: 61). Dissatisfaction with the US foreign policy establishment's dogmatic position, its perceived lack of political nuance and habitual promotion of military interventionism had already given rise to the derogatory label of the 'Blob', a moniker originally coined by Ben Rhodes, Obama's foreign policy speechwriter and deputy national security advisor (Samuels 2016). Partisan polarization and public dissatisfaction with the US government had steadily increased under the Obama presidency (Oliver and Rahn 2016). The American electorate was divided between ideologically opposing camps (Pew 2014) with voter coalitions separated by race, gender, level of education and socio-economic status (Jacobson 2016). Trump's electoral base of White working-class and non-college educated voters in the South and Midwest expressed a combination of political alienation, economic insecurity and cultural anxiety tied to the impact of globalization, changing demographics and immigration that were primarily informed by questions of identity. Trump voters' subjective perception of their own economic and social status was one of relative deprivation and decline, and loss of overall societal relevance and cultural hegemony (Hochschild 2018, Jardina 2019).

This combination of anti-establishment resentment, ontological insecurity, and social marginalization opened a discursive space for Trump's populist reframing of foreign and economic policy, trade and immigration, which combined disdain for the corrupt Washington elites with promises of national revival and renewal ('Make America Great Again') through economic protectionism, strict anti-migration measures, militarized border security, and a transactional focus on prioritizing US interests in international affairs. America First thus both exploited and contributed to a loss of political legitimacy of the dominant bi-partisan elite consensus on liberal hegemony, which resulted in a significant widening of the space for debate on US foreign policy and national security in both parties. This shift manifested as an internal fracturing between defenders of the status quo and inner-party groupings forcefully advocating for major policy changes. In the Democratic Party, for example, the left-wing populist Bernie Sanders and the liberal progressive Elizabeth Warren outlined foreign policy platforms during the 2020 presidential campaign that both opposed Trump's America First stance and demanded substantial cuts to the US defense budget, an end to military interventions overseas, and halting US support for Saudi Arabia in its war in Yemen (Ettinger 2020). In the Republican Party, foreign and national security experts, who had become known as 'Never Trumpers' for their rejection of the Trump presidency and its American First credo had been marginalized and forced into inner-party exile, while prominent figures like Mike Pompeo, Rand Paul and Ted Cruz would endorse President Biden's decision for withdrawal from Afghanistan, echoing widespread sentiments in the Republican Party and among Republican voters that the era of 'forever wars' had to come to an end and that there was no return to the *status quo ante* of Republican foreign policy orthodoxy, directly echoing Trump's anti-interventionist stance (Lerer 2021).

The popularity of Trump's populist attacks against the misguided 'globalism', 'economic surrender' and failed military interventions launched by the bi-partisan US foreign policy establishment had found a particularly positive echo among Republicans, where over 80% GOP voters had consistently supported Trump's America First course (Pew 2018). A survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in 2020 found that Republican voters ultimately preferred economic protectionism and a nationalist foreign policy over support for multilateralism and global engagement (Smeltz et al. 2020). Almost half of Republicans agreed that 'the United States is rich and powerful enough to go it alone, without getting involved in the problems of the rest of the world' (Ibid.). This popular support forced many establishment conservatives to endorse America First positions over traditional Republican and neoconservative priorities, such as support for free trade, or the use of force in support of the global spread of democracy and freedom. Key nationalist populist policy issues, such as opposition to free trade deals, or fortifying the US-Mexico border, were, at the same time, addressed primarily to a core constituency of White working-class and non-college educated voters in the heartland whose views on foreign policy and economic issues both lacked representation at the elite level and which was more hostile toward globalization, internationalism and immigration than mainstream American society (Foyle 2021, Pew 2018).

Trump, Trade and Economic Nationalism

Trump's candidacy and subsequent presidency valued 'folk economics'—that is, the economic notions that naive (untrained) individuals have and the perceptions of such individuals about the economy (Rubin, 2003) over mainstream economic expertise. Generally, economists view economic knowledge as objective and analytical—as a strict science that helps predict what might happen, regulate economic forces and promote economic strategies. "As a consequence, they are not very interested in how people view the

economy or in non-scientific theories about the economy, except as something that should be replaced by scientific knowledge. In fact, economists can be quite hostile to persons who speak on economic topics but who lack academic credentials” (Swedberg, 2018, p. 4). This view produces a sharp divide between scientific economic knowledge and folk economics that is ripe for exploitation by a populist narrative that pits the people against a corrupt elite. With Trump, folk economic rhetoric coalesced with an economic nationalist, populist narrative that threw any sense of normalcy in trade policy out the window. In 2016, presidential candidates Trump and Sanders connected with people by tapping into a basic, everyday folk economics that resonated with certain demographics in American society. Trump and Sanders valued and amplified the economic understandings and experiences of everyday people, while the other candidates such as Hillary Clinton sought to educate the ‘folk’ about why trade and liberalizing the economy was important, drawing on economic theory, historical trajectories and technical terms. This aligned with a populist portrayal of the economy as a conflict between the regular, working-class people versus the elite, and when it came to economic issues such as trade agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, NAFTA or trade with China, very quickly mainstream economic arguments became framed by Trump as elitist and out of touch with regular Americans. A folk populism was born and quickly constrained US economic policies as Trump re-made what a folk populist approach to US foreign policy would look like and what it would mean for trade politics.

Trump approached US trade politics as an opportunity to turn back time. His folk populist narrative framed past trade agreements and globalization broadly as responsible for taking away jobs from Americans and treating lower-wage workers as expendable. He claimed to stand up for the ‘forgotten worker’ and promised to restore dignity to the working people. For example, in a speech delivered in Dimondale, Michigan on August 19, 2016, he explicitly

claimed to give a voice to the forgotten workers: “It's going to be a victory for the people, a victory for the wage-earner, the factory worker. Remember this, a big, big victory for the factory worker. They haven't had those victories for a long time. A victory for every citizen and for all of the people whose voices have not been heard for many, many years. They're going to be heard again. [Applause]” (Lamont , Park and Ayala-Hurtado, 2017, 164). In his economic narrative, Trump elevated the ‘folk’ or the ‘people’ and pitted them against corrupt government officials who had traded away their jobs and dignity to China, Mexico and other countries through disastrous trade policies that only he could re-negotiate and restore. He flipped the trade narrative from one where globalization lifted all boats and brought new opportunities to Americans to blaming globalization for the ills of the ‘rust belt’ and an elitist mentality that valued white collar jobs over hard-working, blue collar workers. As he stated, “This is not a rising tide that lifts all boats. This is a wave of globalization that wipes out our middle class and our jobs. We need to reform our economic system so that, once again, we can all succeed together, and America can become rich again” (Trump, June 22, 2016). Trump positioned himself as an outsider to the political arena, someone who would defend the common folk against the elites. In a speech in Green Bay, Wisconsin on August 5, 2016, he declared: “I’m not a politician, proudly. I’m not part of the system. I ran against the system.” And later, in September 2016, he called himself an “outsider fighting for you” (Trump, August 5th, 2016). This self-presentation not only resonated with white working-class Americans’ views of the government, it quickly established a divide with his opponents like Hillary Clinton who had been an instrumental part of the negotiations of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as Secretary of State under President Obama and now needed to try and pivot on the issue. The impact on US trade policy was swift.

Trump’s folk economic populism took an immediate and shocking toll on support for the TPP particularly with Republicans who were crucial for its legislative success. The TPP, the

largest regional trade accord in history, would have set new terms for trade and business investment among the United States and 11 other Pacific Rim nations. In May 2015, the Senate approved ‘fast-track’ authority clearing the way for the President to sign the TPP, which he did at the beginning of 2016, leaving only Congressional ratification as a final step which Obama seemed poised to achieve by the summer of 2016. In February 2016, President Obama told a New Zealand audience, “We should get TPP done this year and give more American workers the shot at success they deserve and help more American businesses compete and win around the world” (Obama, 2016). However, three months later, public opinion shifted on trade and 85% of Republicans reported that trade deals hurt US jobs – a stark turnaround from the traditional Republican free trade position from less than a year earlier. The positive and optimistic view of the benefits of free trade quickly hit stark resistance as Trump’s reframing caught fire. Trump redefined who could be considered ‘the people’ or ‘the folk’ and quickly their rhetoric differentiated themselves from the ‘folk’ or ‘people’ referred to by President Obama and candidate Clinton. Trump used the term ‘workers’ in opposition to ‘politicians’ and ‘financial elites’ in many of his speeches on the economy and trade. Trump’s folk populism reset the ‘who’ of trade debates and ultimately forced Hillary Clinton to change her position on TPP, effectively killing President Obama’s chances of passing the agreement before the end of his term.

For Trump, the TPP was a central touchstone for a fierce nationalist narrative that fused with populism to position America ‘first’ over globalist economic policies. In June 2016, he stated: “We...switched from a policy of Americanism – focusing on what's good for America's middle class – to a policy of globalism, focusing on how to make money for large corporations who can move their wealth and workers to foreign countries all to the detriment of the American worker and the American economy” (Trump, June 22, 2016). He regularly

addressed TPP by name through his populist narrative. In August, 2016, he stated, “Just imagine how many more automobile jobs will be lost if the TPP is actually approved. That is why I have announced we will withdraw from the deal before that can ever happen” (Trump, August 8, 2016). Of course, this is what happened. President Trump unsigned the TPP on his first day in office on Jan. 23, 2017. Through his attacks on trade and past trade agreements, Trump reframed the liberal economic consensus on trade and globalization from one that brought positive gains and aligned with US values to one that sowed economic destruction, job loss and the plundering of the working class. Moreover, he redefined ‘folk economics’ from a layperson's mistaken understanding of economic laws and science to a deified, glorified practical knowledge that made instituting long-maligned strategies such as tariffs and protectionist blunt instruments acceptable policies under his new administration. Indeed, once in office, Trump instituted one of his long-standing crusades into common institutionalized practice—resetting economic policy towards China at any cost.

As a presidential candidate, Trump made trade a centerpiece of his economic policy platform blaming past presidents for trade deficits, bad trade deals and losing U.S. manufacturing jobs to other countries. When he announced his candidacy, he made it clear that if he were elected, he would take a different approach to China, saying, “Our country is in serious trouble. We don't have victories anymore. We used to have victories, but we don't have them. When was the last time anybody saw us beating, let's say, China in a trade deal? They kill us. I beat China all the time. All the time” (Trump, June 16, 2015). The main focus of Trump’s angst with US-China trade was a ballooning trade deficit with China, the belief that China manipulated its currency to keep its products artificially cheap and impossible for U.S. manufacturing to match in pricing, and that China stole intellectual property from U.S. companies.

Within the first few months of his presidency, President Trump made it clear that his administration would apply a new, and much more aggressive approach to the US-China trade relationship with the intent on getting a better deal. Bolstered by economic advisors such as Peter Navarro, a long-standing critic of China, Trump signed an executive order in March, 2017 directing his economic team to examine US-China trade for unfair practices that he could label a national security threat. By the end of his first year in office, President Trump announced that the US would impose tariffs or taxes on Chinese imports to curb what he deemed unfair trade politics on the part of the Chinese, and this started the series of retaliations and escalations between the US and China over the next two years known as the US-China trade war (Skonieczny, 2021).

Within a year, the US and China were locked in an escalating battle of reciprocating tariffs. It started when Trump announced he would impose stiff tariffs on imports of steel and aluminium. The action, which came against the wishes of Trump's pro-trade advisers, would impose tariffs of 25 percent on steel and 10 percent on aluminium, effectively placing a tax on every foreign shipment of those metals into the United States (Swanson, 2018). Although the tariffs targeted all aluminium and steel products, not just those from China, China responded by putting tariffs as high as 25 percent on imports of 128 American-made products, including pork and seamless steel pipes (Buckley, 2018). The Chinese Ministry of Commerce stated, "We hope that the United States will rescind its measures that violate World Trade Organisation rules as quickly as possible. China and the United States are the world's two biggest economies, and cooperation is the only correct choice. Both sides should use dialogue and consultation to resolve their mutual concerns" (Buckley, 2018).

However, the tariff war continued to escalate. This went on throughout the summer of 2018 until by late fall, the Trump administration implemented 10% tariffs on \$200 billion of

Chinese imports saying the rate would increase to 25% on January 1, 2019. China applied duties of its own on \$60 billion of U.S. goods and at this point, it could no longer match the amount of goods subject to tariffs by the US because China simply did not import more than \$60 billion of US goods (“Timeline”, 2019). In essence, all imports and exports between the US and China were now subjected to a potential tariff by the deadline of January 1, 2019.

Finally, by early October, 2018, President Trump announced that a partial trade deal—Phase 1—had been agreed to by both parties. The partial deal included relief for American farmers and businesses as China agreed to buy \$40 billion to \$50 billion worth of American agricultural products annually. The deal also included guidelines on managing China’s currency and strengthened Chinese protections for American intellectual property (Swanson, 2019). As part of the negotiations, the US agreed to not move ahead with plans to raise tariffs on \$250 billion worth of goods to 30 percent, but the existing tariffs on nearly 2/3 of Chinese products remained in place. The Phase 1 agreement was part of a three-phase approach and was officially signed January 15, 2020. However, the ink was barely dry on the trade agreement when news of a novel virus in Wuhan (COVID-19), China began startling global leaders and raising concerns of a global pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic left little room to ease tense relations with China. While the pandemic left economic turmoil in its wake, it stalled any movement on trade relations and Trump left office with the three-phase trade agreement still stuck in Phase 1. Trump’s trade war with China also stalled as the global economy shut down during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, but the anti-China rhetoric now had a new tone as Trump repeatedly disparaged China for spreading the virus and causing the global pandemic (Neuman, 2020). While Trump upended US trade and economic politics and policies with his folk populist-nationalist narrative, it didn’t go away with his presidency. Relations with China remain constrained by Trump’s trade trade

narrative and President Biden has yet to renegotiate the US-China trade deal or move forward on implementation of Phase 2. The Trump shock reframed the narrative of US trade policy and putting ‘America first’ is now part of any equation of US foreign policy even with a different president in charge.

America First and National Security

Populist foreign policy often involves the use of the international stage to pursue the external legitimization of populist projects. This gives populist leaders a ‘way out’ of the legitimacy challenges they find ‘at home’ (Wajner 2022). On matters of national security Trump’s rhetoric was not intended to legitimate US foreign policy so much as reinforce his personalised ‘movement’ and stabilise his erratic leadership of his right-wing coalition. This entailed the construction of security threats increasingly framed as interlinking and transnational (‘the border’ was totemic in this regard), with malign outside forces aided by duplicitous elites in the United States. As Trump’s rhetoric grew more conspiratorial toward the end of his term, the ‘deep state’ served as an important rhetorical target; a stand-in for the ‘swamp’ that Trump had promised to drain in 2016 (Horwitz 2021). The various security crises that threatened the heartland could be attributed to the officials, bureaucrats, and administrators of the deep state, who betrayed everyday Americans through their links to the nefarious Others established previously in Trumpian discourse, and who reputedly undermined his authority in a host of fantastical ways. This served to legitimate President Trump’s eclectic, antagonistic style in the target audience, but it failed to cohere as an alternative to the national security consensus that existed prior to his election. During the 2016 campaign, Trump broke with Republican orthodoxy in voicing pointed criticism of the Iraq war. Falsely claiming he opposed the war prior to the invasion, Trump used his distinctive bombast to confront the more establishment figures in the field, arguing not only that Iraq

was a ‘big fat mistake’ but that George W. Bush ‘lied’ about the reasons for the war; ‘we’ve been in the Middle East for 15 years’, Trump said, ‘and we haven’t won anything’ (Grunwald 2016). Within the voting public, there was a certain perception of Trump as an ‘anti-war’ figure, and the ambiguity surrounding his ‘America First’ approach to security strategy likely enhanced his idiosyncratic appeal. Based largely on his antipathy for the ‘Blob’, some analysts viewed Trump as a ‘realist’ (Schweller 2018). Others pushed back on this claim (Walt 2018). The characterisation of Trump’s security strategy as ‘Jacksonian’ provides some analytical purchase (Biegon 2019; Lacatus 2021; Löffmann 2019, p. 128; Holland and Fermor 2021). Mead (2017) himself depicted Trump’s election as a ‘Jacksonian revolt’ unleashing populist nationalism against the established order. In Jacksonian fashion (Mead 2002, pp. 218-263), Trump’s security policy demonstrated an unmistakable militarism. This ‘hawkishness’ would protect the honour and security of the ‘folk community’, a hallmark of this nationalist tradition. In the early stages of his presidency, Trump routinely referred to the military brass affectionately as ‘my generals’. His administration sought and secured sizeable increases in the Pentagon budget. The 2017 National Security Strategy called for ‘rebuilding’ the military to achieve ‘peace through strength’, reorienting the United States toward ‘great power competition’ (White House 2017). Whatever scepticism Trump had regarding the ‘nation-building’ elements of interventionism, he did not shy away from the deployment of military power. In his first few months as president, Trump bragged about using the ‘mother of all bombs’ in Afghanistan. In April 2017, the administration launched a missile strike on a Syrian airbase controlled by the Assad regime in response to its use of chemical weapons in the country’s civil war. The US carried out further strikes against Syrian weapons facilities in 2018. The actions in Syria, much like his counterterrorism strategy, won plaudits from the foreign policy elites Trump aimed to denigrate.

Indeed, when unveiled in October 2018, analysts viewed the National Strategy for Counterterrorism as ‘utterly conventional’ (Fonzone and Hartig 2018), with some hailing it as a ‘relief’ (Geltzer 2018). Gone were the campaign pledges to reinstate torture and seize Middle Eastern oil fields. The document included one quote from Trump using the phrase ‘Radical Islamic terrorists’ in relation to ISIS, but the text otherwise used the less-provocative ‘Islamist’ when discussing religious grievances (White House 2018, p. 7). Trump sought to maintain his hard-line, ‘muscular’ stance against transnational terrorist groups. The struggle against ISIS was often cast in civilisational tones. The White House initially ramped-up the use of drones for targeted killing, loosening restrictions on strikes and expanding their geographic scope, most noticeably in Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. Consistent with the Obama administration’s approach, Trump also relied heavily on the use of Special Operations Forces in counterterrorism practices (Biegon and Watts 2020, p. 45). ‘From the outset’, according to the American Civil Liberties Union, ‘Trump’s Principles, Standards, and Procedures for U.S. Direct Action Against Terrorist Targets (PSP) (was) striking for the bellicose and nationalistic tone it (set) and the message it (sent) to agencies involved in lethal operations’ (Shamsi 2021).

Trump interjected considerable uncertainty into US counterterrorism efforts without dramatically altering the substance of US policy. Over the course of his term, the spike in drone strikes would level-off and decline, even as questions remained about the (higher) rate of civilian casualties under his administration. Trump would hint that he was withdrawing US personnel from key ‘hotspots’, only to reverse himself later on, as happened with regards to Afghanistan in 2017 and Syria in 2018-19. Cuts in State Department-administered security assistance initiatives would be offset by increases in Pentagon-funded programmes (Arabia and Goodman 2018). The 2020 drone strike on Iranian general Qasem Soleimani was perhaps

the most dramatic instance of Trump's outward erraticism impacting US security policy. Although assassination has a history in US statecraft, the Soleimani killing was unusual in that a drone strike was used against a state official (Trenta 2021), thus marking a clear escalation of the contemporary targeted killing programme.

In concrete terms, Trump did not shift the parameters of US interventionism (Biegon and Watts 2020; Lacatus 2021). It was Biden, not Trump, who ended the US military's presence in Afghanistan. Trump maintained US support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen. Closer to home, Trump appointed neoconservative operative Elliot Abrams, formerly a 'never Trumper', as special envoy for Venezuela. In a series of tweets, Trump brazenly called for regime change in Venezuela, urging military officials to depose Nicolas Maduro. John Bolton, Trump's third national security advisor, articulated the administration's aggressive stance toward Latin American adversaries, including the governments of Cuba and Nicaragua, while claiming that 'the Monroe Doctrine was alive and well' (Taladrid 2021). A 2019 coup in Bolivia garnered enthusiastic support from Trump. Although the administration briefly suspended development aid to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras over the migration issue, the United States continued to provide substantial amounts of counternarcotics assistance to repressive governments in Central America's 'Northern Triangle', despite ongoing human rights concerns.

Trump's erratic style was tied to his efforts to disrupt the status quo, heightening conditions of uncertainty and unpredictability in US foreign policy (Bentley and Lerner 2021). His populism was on display in his highly personalised approach to diplomacy. This was most pronounced in his meetings with other populist leaders, such as Vladimir Putin. Although his administration implemented a series of new sanctions on Russia, Trump's various encounters

with Putin often left diplomats and intelligence officials scrambling (Baker 2019). On North Korea, Trump dramatically broke with the normal protocols of professionalised diplomacy to pursue matters via Twitter. Trump's bizarre relationship with Kim Jung-un saw crude insults and dangerous taunts give way to a 'bromance' complete with 'love letters'. A headlines-grabbing 2018 meeting with Kim in Singapore failed to produce a meaningful bilateral breakthrough, but it did intensify the personalisation of US foreign policy associated with the Trump shock.

Trump's rhetoric challenged the liberalism of traditional security narratives more than the internationalist posture of US strategy per se. Trump's brand of populist 'ethnic nationalism' constituted a 'sharp break' with the decades-long commitment to liberal leadership, even as it resonated with deeper currents in American culture and history (Restad 2020, p. 22). On NATO, Trump's campaign criticisms, though toned down over the course of his term, persisted. In a 2017 speech, he reportedly changed his comments at the last minute to avoid explicitly reaffirming the United States' commitment to Article 5 of the NATO treaty (the core of the collective defense principle), surprising his close advisors (Glasser 2017). As he continued to tweet disparagingly about the alliance, others in the administration sought to reassure anxious allies. Trump fuelled the uncertainty surrounding NATO, complicating the transatlantic security relationship and heightening discussions about European strategic autonomy (Schreer 2019). Although US policy toward NATO illustrated the degree to which liberal multilateralism could be eroded by Trump's transactionalist tendencies, America First did not lead to an abandonment of the institution (Sperling and Webber 2019). Even so, there was a general sense of crisis that enveloped much of NATO during Trump's term.

Whereas American presidents generally strive to present a calming disposition on matters of national security, Trump was unusual in his persistent deployment of crisis narratives (Hall 2021; Homolar and Scholz 2019). Scholars have connected this to issues of ‘ontological security’. As Homolar and Scholz argue (2019), ‘Trump-speak’ was about instilling a sense of anxiety in the US public to reinforce supporters’ perceptions that he alone provided the means back to ‘normality’ and ontological ‘wholeness’. This meant that his foreign policy moved quickly from enemy to enemy, target to target (Hall 2021) – from ISIS to immigration, Iran to China, terrorists to protesters, crime to Covid, and so on. Trump’s security imaginary was thus closely intertwined with the framing of US national identity (Löfflmann 2021). The ‘real’ America was increasingly under threat from an array of Others both external to the United States but also inside its very borders (Löfflmann 2021; Holland and Fermor 2021). This is not entirely novel to US foreign policy discourse, of course, but the boundaries between external and internal threats were increasingly, and deliberately, blurred. In Trump’s populist framing, threats became more ‘existential’ as they fused and coalesced. With minimal connection to ‘actual’ trends and events, the dangers to US identity were always escalating, the internal sanctity of the ‘real’ folk community under ever-more ontological distress.

In this context, the foreign policy establishment was part of the problem. Even as he appealed to Jacksonian principles of military honour, Trump’s Manichean rhetoric could extend to the ‘globalists’ in charge of defense policy (Biegon 2019; Löfflmann 2019). This provided Trump the flexibility to criticise elements of the military establishment as he saw fit. The trend only intensified after Trump left office amidst violent protests and reports of an attempted ‘coup’. Reminiscent of earlier spats with Generals Mattis and McMaster (Trump’s first Defense Secretary and second national security advisor, respectively), he feuded with

Gen. Mark Milley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, whom Trump installed in the position in September 2019. In response to Milley's concerns that Trump would try to stay in office after losing re-election, for example, Trump (2021) issued a statement accusing Milley of 'trying to curry favor with the Radical Left and the absolute crazy people espousing a philosophy which will destroy our Country'. The hostility toward certain military leaders presented a difficult balancing act for Trump given the overt militarism of his America First agenda. The same could be said of Trump's fluid position on the US's overseas military commitments. Trump tweeted about 'endless wars' so frequently that, by the end of his term, the phrase became something of trope in his rhetorical repertoire (Miller 2020). After leaving office, Trump issued a spate of contradictory statements about the Biden administration's withdrawal from Afghanistan (Hurley 2021). The inconsistencies in Trump's rhetoric contributed to a highly ambiguous discourse lacking a coherent narrative. One constant was the centrality of Trump himself to the agenda he represented.

Conclusion

Our focus on Trump's style and rhetoric is not meant to imply that his presidency had no material impact on US security policy. In the security realm as in economic matters, the America First agenda was more nationalistic and zero-sum than was the case with previous administrations. Moreover, the renewed attention on 'great power competition' (White House 2017; 2018) is likely to have some staying power. Above all, Trump's security policy was defined by an explicit illiberalism that disrupted traditional narratives of foreign policy legitimation (Biegon 2019; Lacatus 2021; Posen 2018). Gone were platitudes about democracy, multilateralism, humanitarianism, human rights, and the rules-based order. The

Trump shock to national security and US foreign policy did not mean that a new ideational paradigm of nationalist populism had fully supplanted previous doctrines, nor did it lead to a fundamental restructuring of the means and ends of US statecraft. But it did produce a dislocation in the narratives of US foreign policy that, if not unprecedented, was certainly deserving of the ‘shock’ appellation. The main political effects of this populist reframing of US foreign policy under the America First paradigm were to both challenge global perceptions of US engagement and world leadership abroad, and to erode the discursive dominance of the US foreign policy establishment at home. Trump’s preferences for a foreign policy course of non-interventionism and unilateralism, hardline anti-immigration measures and economic protectionism posed an unprecedented challenge to the discursive dominance of a grand strategy of liberal hegemony and its political supporters in Washington DC. The effects of this discursive intervention would outlast his presidency and question long-held foreign policy positions, from supporting ‘forever wars’ to defining America’s role in the world.

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