

# When Donald Trump Says His Foreign Policy is 'America First'—What Exactly Does He Mean?

*Four experts consider how exactly Trump might go about making America great again.*

*By Sherle R. Schwenninger, Heather Hurlburt, Stephen Kinzer and Juan Cole*

**L**ate last month, in order to give the public some sense of how, as president, he would operationalize his famous promise to “make America great again,” Donald Trump unveiled a new slogan. “America First will be the overriding theme of my administration,” he declared. Should Trump win November’s election, it will not take Jeffrey Goldberg 20,000 words to tease out what exactly the Trump Doctrine is.

The phrase is not new: The “America First Committee,” historians

tirelessly explained to inquiring reporters, was a group of some 800,000 Americans, led by the Hitler-praising aviator Charles Lindbergh, which argued in the early 1940s that the United States had no interests at stake in the fight against Nazi Germany. Most of the subsequent think-pieces condemned Trump's use of a phrase with "ugly echoes in US history," but rare has been the writer—the historian Jeremy Kuzmarov, in *The Huffington Post*, was one, several weeks before Trump's address—who notes that, far from being an exclusively right-wing, anti-Semitic organization, America First actually included many liberals, progressives, and socialists who remembered the First World War as a bonanza for imperialists and war profiteers, and who were not eager to see the United States involved in a reprisal. Norman Thomas, the Socialist Party leader and former *Nation* editor, spoke passionately and often on behalf of America First, before finally denouncing Lindbergh after he gave an incendiary speech blaming "the Jews" for the war. Gore Vidal was a member of the chapter at Phillips Exeter, and Gerald Ford of the one at Yale.

It may be worth keeping in mind the ideological diversity of those who favored the phrase "America First" when it was first used, 75 years ago, while reading the following responses to the question of what Trump's foreign policy might actually be if he becomes president next January. It is, of course, difficult to say what such a proudly unpredictable figure really believes on any particular issue, but it is possible, and useful, to work through different scenarios a President Trump might face and to ponder, given past comments and present commitments, how he would handle them. Some on the left, these responses suggest, might be surprised by what they see, while others will be, and ought to be, very alarmed.

—*Richard Kreitner*

SHERLE R. SCHWENNINGER

### ***NEW DEALS***

Trump draws from two distinct traditions in US foreign policy that have been neglected in recent years. The first is an America-first economic nationalism that rose to a short-lived prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s and that was embraced to some degree by the 1992 the

presidential campaign of Ross Perot. The second is a great-power realism, as briefly practiced by the George H.W. Bush administration. These two traditions lost to what would become Bill Clinton neoliberal triumphalism. The 2016 election thus promises to be something of a rematch between Trump's economic nationalism 2.0 and Hillary Clinton's muscular liberal interventionism 2.0.

By combining these two traditions with his own trademark emphasis on making deals and building walls, Trump has challenged the foreign-policy orthodoxy that has held sway for more than two decades. If he holds to the positions he has outlined so far in his campaign, he would bring five important changes (as well as some worrying warts) to US foreign policy.

First, he would lead a transition away from the policy of regime change and nation-building that has wreaked so much havoc in the world and cost us so much in money and lives. He has repeatedly argued that the Clinton-supported drives for regime change in Iraq, Libya, and Syria have brought nothing but chaos and disorder. Trump has said as president he would be willing to live with Assad in power in Syria and would focus America's energies on destroying ISIS. (Bernie Sanders has said the same thing.)

Second, Trump has indicated he would stop the drift toward a potentially dangerous new Cold War with Russia and would open the door to a new partnership with Moscow. He has acknowledged Russia's national-security interests in Ukraine, has welcomed Russia's fight against ISIS, and has signaled that there is no reason for the United States not to have good relations with Moscow.

Third, he would attempt to strike a new bargain with America's Cold War allies by making them do more for their own security. He has argued that NATO is anachronistic, as is our security partnership in Asia with Japan and South Korea. Much like the economic nationalists of the early 1990s, Trump asks why, decades after the Cold War has ended, we should bear the burden of defending countries that are as rich as we are. He has also suggested that the days of special privilege for "allies" like Saudi Arabia are over—asking the perfectly valid question of why we should tolerate their reckless actions that only endanger American interests.

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## **human would inform Trump's policy decisions.**

Fourth, Trump would put economic nationalism above geopolitics. He would abandon free-trade agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), whose main rationale is geostrategic (to contain China). Trade and alliance relations would be put to a new test: whether they served the interests of the nation as a whole, not some mistaken notion of America's global leadership.

Finally, Trump would redefine American exceptionalism by bringing an end to the neoliberal/neoconservative globalist project that Hillary Clinton and many Republicans support. The good news is that this could stop if not reverse the drift to a world divided between an American-led global liberal order and a Russian- and Chinese-led state capitalist bloc. The not-so-good news is that it is not clear what Trump would put in its place—an ugly tit-for-tat nationalism or, more hopefully, a new economic and deal-centered internationalism.

## **HEATHER HURLBURT**

### ***'REALLY GOOD AT WAR'***

Though just a year ago many of us were blissfully unaware of Donald Trump as anything other than an entertainer and a life-style brand, he has a 40-year history of public statements about the world beyond America's shores. Beneath the great range and inconsistency of Trump's stated positions on national security lies a set of core views motivating those pronouncements. Those beliefs would shape his actions in office—as they have shaped everything he has done in his adult life. And they are worth examining carefully, because they are diametrically opposed to the core progressive belief that peace and well-being are founded not on American bullying but on just and equitable relations among nations and peoples.

Three core principles would shape America's foreign policy during a Trump presidency.

First, the sole aim of diplomacy is to squeeze more out of other countries.

Whether discussing how he would approach the Iran nuclear deal, climate change, or NATO, Trump's answer is unvarying: US advantage is the only important factor, and he can get us a better deal. For example, he recently told Reuters that he would "at a minimum" renegotiate the Paris climate accord to be more beneficial to the United States, while "at a maximum, I may do something else." There was no hint that he sees the world as an interdependent system, or that he believes the United States has any responsibilities in any of these areas.

Second, law and military discipline are tools that can and should be used for his own ends, and are without any intrinsic normative value. When pressed on his support for torture and intentional military targeting of civilians—both of which are illegal under international and domestic law, as well as military regulations—Trump has opined that he would change those laws to make the acts legal.

Finally, and most alarmingly, large swathes of humanity are essentially sub-human. Trump's many comments reveal disdain for Muslims, Hispanics, poor and middle-class people, women, and the disabled. These are not merely personal prejudices. They would inform his policy decisions.

Try to imagine the first emergency cabinet meeting in the Situation Room, after, say, an aircraft with US citizens on board has gone missing. The White House Twitter account has already speculated, without any proof whatsoever, that a terror attack has occurred. The president bullies the career military and intelligence officers who make up the bulk of attendees, and who urge restraint until more facts are known. "I know more about ISIS than the generals do," Trump said in a speech last year. "Believe me, I've had a lot of wars of my own. I'm really good at war."

Trump is told that a military response requires the permission of the states whose territory would be flown through or targeted. No, he says, we need to act now. "I always say we have to be unpredictable," he has boasted. He orders the military to target the families of the hijackers. He suggests making moves with nuclear-equipped weapons. "I don't want to rule out anything," he might say.

STEPHEN KINZER

*THE BLOB-BASHER*

Like the proverbial box of chocolates, a Donald Trump presidency would be full of foreign-policy surprises. One easy guess is that we'll get more chauvinistic chest-beating and hyper-aggression. That is by no means certain, however. Trump might begin his term by asking aides for policy proposals based on the geopolitical realities of today, rather than of the 1940s. Since he is not part of the Washington foreign-policy "blob" and has not read the "playbook," he might be open to blinding flashes of realism.

First on the agenda would be a new strategy to defeat ISIS. Trump might grab a sheet of paper and make two columns, one for forces in the Middle East wholeheartedly dedicated to fighting ISIS and the other for those with different agendas. Saudi Arabia and Turkey: out! Our new anti-ISIS coalition would include Russia, Bashar al-Assad, Hezbollah, Iran, and the Kurds. The Saudis would howl in protest, and Turkey might threaten to retaliate by sending another million refugees to Europe, but President Trump would simply smile and move on.

**It is not difficult to imagine Trump reopening the US embassy in Tehran.**

Buoyed by turning the tide against ISIS, Trump might then look again at Iran. Throughout this campaign, he has denounced the nuclear deal repeatedly, but he has not denigrated Iran itself. Many Iranians would welcome his victory, since they call Hillary Clinton "sanctions lady" and blame her for making their daily lives worse. Unbound by the anti-Iran fanaticism that reverberates in Washington, Trump could recognize Iran as a potential partner in the Middle East, even beyond the fight with ISIS. It is a young, modern society, fully committed to destroying the Sunni terror embodied in ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban. Trump would see that Iran shares our Middle East security interests more fully than some of our so-called friends in the region. It is not difficult to imagine him reopening the US embassy in Tehran, and saying, "We should have done this long ago."

From Tehran, Trump might jet to Moscow for another round of transactional deal-making. NATO was fine for the Cold War, he'll tell Vladimir Putin, but those days are over and the United States no longer wants a military role in Europe. As for relations between Russia and other European countries, that will be those countries' business. Europe is no longer shattered and defenseless, as it was 70 years ago. Trump would give the continent room to come up with its own security arrangements.

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Back in Washington, Trump might ask for a list of US military bases overseas. "Cut this in half," he'll say. Then he'll kill the trillion-dollar F-35 fighter jet program—outraging Bernie Sanders, who wants a squadron based in Vermont. He'll tell the Navy it can have more surface ships or a new set of Ohio-class nuclear submarines, but not both. At a press conference, he'll claim to have saved more cash with a few strokes of the pen than could be stuffed inside the new Mar-a-Lago in Havana.

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JUAN COLE

*DELUSIONS OF GREATNESS*

Donald Trump's foreign policy, as he has so far announced it, is a mixture of isolationism and surgical aggression, with some war crimes thrown in as a bonus. President Trump would defund NATO and tell Europe it's on its own in facing the challenges besetting the continent, from turmoil in the Middle East to the resolution of the conflict over Ukraine and the Crimea. In East Asia Trump would likely encourage a revival of Japanese militarism to confront China, and has said that Japan and South Korea should consider becoming nuclear states so as to provide for their own security vis-à-vis Beijing. He would start a trade war with China by removing its most-favored-nation trading status and imposing stiff tariffs on Chinese goods, seeking to reduce the American balance-of-trade deficit. He would also start a trade war with Mexico, and deport some 11 million undocumented workers presently in the US.

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## **trade wars.**

Trump would abrogate US participation in the United Nations' Iran deal. This would not prove effective in pressuring Iran to strike a new deal, since Europe, Russia and China are committed to the plan and their businesses would take advantage of the US absence to exploit the bonanza of Iran's opening. Europe, having been cut loose by Trump, will feel no compunctions in defying him by adhering to the JCPOA. China and Russia, along with Italy and France, will be primary beneficiaries.

In Iraq, Trump would send in special operations forces to kidnap the wives and children of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and other ISIS leaders, and to capture ordinary ISIS fighters. He would direct the CIA to torture these captives in hopes of receiving from them actionable intelligence for assassination campaigns or forcing the group's leadership to capitulate. He might send in conventional forces to occupy the oil fields and refineries controlled or threatened by ISIS, both in Iraq and in neighboring Syria. He would encourage Russia to remain responsible for Syria's security and would back strongman Bashar al-Assad.

Trump would demand that Saudi Arabia pay the United States billions of dollars a year to provide a security umbrella for it and other countries of the oil-rich Gulf Cooperation Council. Should Riyadh refuse, Trump would block imports of Saudi petroleum to the United States, a move that would have little effect on Saudi policy anyway. Perhaps he would close the US naval base in Bahrain, headquarters of the Fifth Fleet, and withdraw American forces from the Gulf entirely. Saudi Arabia and the GCC, stung and fearing Iranian hegemony, would seek Chinese security guarantees instead, turning the Persian Gulf into a Chinese lake. Seeking to "make America great again," it seems instead likely that Trump would accelerate China's rise to superpower status and abandon or antagonize US allies, leaving America weak and isolated, its economy devastated by trade wars.