



Explaining the Trump Doctrine

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Trump administration's transactional doctrine appears to be based on Donald Trump's personality and experiences, not on abstract theory about the behavior of states. According to that doctrine, successful relationships can be had with countries that share views regarding mutual benefit. Trump tramples norms that his predecessor, Barack Obama, sought to reinforce for the benefit of the international system and its servants. Obama's doctrine, like Trump's, was an emanation of his own personality.

What is the Trump Doctrine? How can we take the constellation of his administration's policy decisions – stricter border enforcement, tariffs on Chinese imports, loud and successful renegotiation of trade agreements with Canada and Mexico, harsh words for NATO members regarding their paltry contributions, enhanced military cooperation with Poland, challenges to China in Southeast Asia, the move of the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem – and extract a set of principles? And how are Trump's troubling personality and quixotic outbursts to be factored into the equation?

To answer these questions, one must consider whether an analysis can even be conducted against the backdrop of unprecedented opprobrium and insults leveled at Trump by the US and global media – “fascist,” “Nazi,” “racist” – without becoming the target of similar accusations. And above all, one must ask: Is there in fact a “doctrine” as opposed to a style based on personality and instinct? If so, is that really any different from other administrations?

As many have pointed out, Trump's approach to foreign policy, like the man himself, is almost purely transactional, driven by a philosophy that life is a zero-sum game. But in contrast to the elites who planned and executed the last 70 years of American domestic and foreign policy, Trump appears to have no clear vision about the ideal shape or operation of the world.

Most importantly, nothing Trump does is based on intellectual abstractions like international relations theory or any other theory. There are no assumptions about the expected behavior of states, or whether they are following interests or ideologies – only that the US has been misled by “globalization,” which other parties have used to mask their own zero-sum thinking.

There are, however, certain definable goals: the restoration of American economic prominence, from which flows an equally prominent role in international affairs (the essence of the inept phrase “American First”) as well as strong relations with allies. The nature of allies is straightforward if not simplistic: relatively open trade, shared defense responsibilities, and common cultural values. Deals, however, may be done with autocrats, who are flattered and cajoled into line.

This is a strictly utilitarian view of international institutions. The preferred mechanisms of international relations are not structural but personal – hence the ubiquity of son-in-law Jared Kushner as emissary. This turns conventional wisdom about the necessity for wise professionals on its head, and yet returns the US to the pre-WWII norm where prominent businessmen were frequently appointed to foreign policy roles. The UN is regarded not as a forum for defusing international conflict through debate and consensus (or for the venting of grievances and hot air), but as a mechanism that operates to unfairly limit American freedom of movement while demanding American support.

The same suspicion and borderline disdain extends towards other multilateral institutions, including NATO, which are seen as free-riding on American generosity. The Trump Doctrine demands that the usefulness of these and other institutions be continually proven, not assumed. This too reverses 70 years of inertia-driven theory and policy that have mostly accepted these institutions as givens.

In place of system-driven assumptions there are deals within deals, leading to the goal of mutually profitable economic and political relations. Foreign relationships are being systematically rebuilt from the bilateral levels upwards in order to address the two primary threats to American prosperity and safety: China and Iran.

China was shocked to be called out for the first time as an imperialist power that had manipulated international trade to its own advantage and stolen American intellectual property of untold value. Iran was also shocked to find itself the target of renewed sanctions, when previously it had seen the entirety of American (and European) foreign policy constructed to protect the JCPOA. As for Russia, it is now regarded as what it in fact is: a spoiler state determined to make trouble wherever possible, in terminal decline but still central because of its role in Syria and its nuclear arsenal.

Much-derided “s***hole” countries in Africa and Latin America, seemingly incapable of economic or political development, are regarded the way the South Bronx was in

the 1970s: as written-off slums that need to be separated from the rest of the polity and redeveloped, first from within. Given Chinese political and economic advances in these arenas, this is a strategic error, but one that may well be addressed during a second Trump administration when African and Latin American countries realize the full extent to which they have been exploited by China.

The Trump Doctrine's goal is simple: safety and prosperity for America and its allies, and screw everyone else. The "international system" as such does not figure into it. Naturally, this thinking has enraged foreign policy experts who are accustomed to preaching theory, nuance, process, and the wisdom of both their own expertise and that of the international system they serve. European allies, accustomed to both deference and support from American presidents, are flummoxed.

Trump's disdain for the shibboleths of the "system" are another of his countless sins against "norms," which have threatened self-serving policy and media elites as much as his substantive policy changes. But given the lack of articulation, is this really a "doctrine," or is it simply emanations of Trump's personality, founded in instinct and experience?

One way to understand Trump's behavior and policy is to contrast it with Barack Obama's. Obama took a norm-driven, intellectualized approach whereby America was guilty of original sin and where salvation could be realized only through the state.

The policy of the Obama administration was famously characterized as "nation-building at home" and "leading from behind," slogans that had immense policy implications. Among other things, Obama's policy was driven by a credulous view of international institutions and process, and explicit acceptance of these as the means to tame American "arrogance." If there was a theory, it was a non-zero-sum view of the world based on mirror imaging – in other words, all peoples and states share the same basic goal of ensuring that the states are the primary care providers. American leadership was not needed, only American resources. That included direct financial support as well as tacit acceptance of titanic state-level intellectual property theft and cybercrime.

"Nation-building at home" – i.e., the enlargement of the state – also necessitated control over the levers of democracy. In practical terms, this was accomplished by the merger of the Democratic Party with organs of the state, the media-technology-entertainment complex, and the intelligentsia, and the construction of an Obama personality cult that routinely marginalized political opponents as "racists." There is more than a little irony in the fact that for all the cries that Trump is a fascist, America came closer to real fascism under Obama.

Doctrines are extensions of personalities, and part of this devolves to ego. With Obama, there was never any question of his belief in himself. His followers believed in him with equally absolute conviction – he was all-wise, all-seeing, and unflappable.

Obama was, after all, credited by the Nobel Prize committee with bringing peace to the world before he even took office.

With an entire career built solely on his personal charm and his race, Obama's vindictiveness was targeted. Political opponents were dismissed as racist idiots. Foreign leaders mouthed platitudes about his gifts and watched as America withdrew from the world stage. Totalitarians like Putin scoffed and were unrestrained in their aggression. Obama's personality – vain, overconfident, and disdainful of American Exceptionalism – shaped his “doctrine.”

Trump's egotism is also legion, but as a kind of media savant, his performance is both more overt and more subtle than Obama's. Like Obama, Trump's faith in himself is limitless, but his projection of that confidence frequently goes over the top in both bluster and irony – suggesting that it might, at least to an extent, be an act. For both true believers and true haters, there is no doubt about Trump, but the vast middle correctly asks whether he is simply playing a part as a means to inspire, cajole, outrage, and more. This possibility, together with the palpable disconnect between Trump's outrageous words and his limited actions (which are mostly those of a centrist Democrat of the 1990s), leaves open the question of who he really is. Trump's doctrine comes with a built-in uncertainty principle.

Reports that Chinese and Russian leaders are confused by Trump are therefore reassuring. Long accustomed to predictable, statesman-like rhetoric and timid policy from American presidents, Chinese and Russian leaders cannot penetrate Trump's logic or predict his course. The danger is that they will continue to test and probe his resolve, hoping that carefully cultivated domestic and international outrage and Trump's ongoing legal problems will provide distraction. Trump is an even greater nightmare for policy elites, who are accustomed to predictability in the name of management. For them, it's beside the point whether or not Trump's policies are successful or advantageous.

For the Middle East, the implications of the Trump Doctrine remain uncertain. Bedeviled by massive problems bequeathed by the Obama administration (Iran, Syria, Libya and Yemen) as well as the Islamist transformation of Turkey and the self-destructive tendencies of the Saudi elite, exemplified by the Khashoggi murder, Trump's transactional approach has seen only limited gains. The approach has been reaffirmed, however, in the continued emphasis on the necessity for a strong Saudi relationship to oppose Iranian aggression in Yemen.

For Israel and Egypt, the rewards from America's keeping its distance from the intractable Arab-Israeli conflict have been palpable. In contrast, Palestinian rocket attacks and verbal assaults in the wake of the embassy move were convincing evidence for the deal-focused Trump administration that there is no party with whom to transact business. This may be one reason why the much vaunted but still

mysterious “peace deal” has not yet been revealed. As usual, Palestinian inability to recognize the new transactional parameters and their reflexive recourse towards internationalization serve them poorly.

Will a more forward-looking Trump Doctrine be articulated? And if doctrines are indeed more personality-driven than usually recognized, what will future American presidents bring to the world stage? Americans and non-Americans alike might examine candidates with some of these questions in mind, even as we ride the rollercoaster of the Trump administration.

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